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Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
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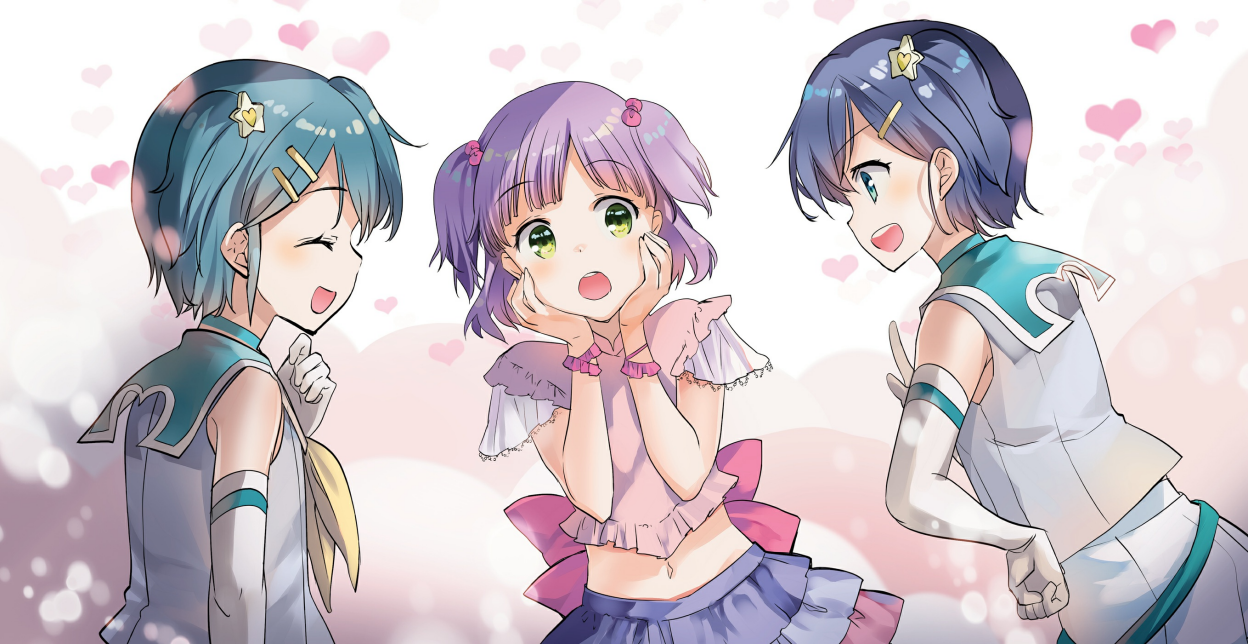
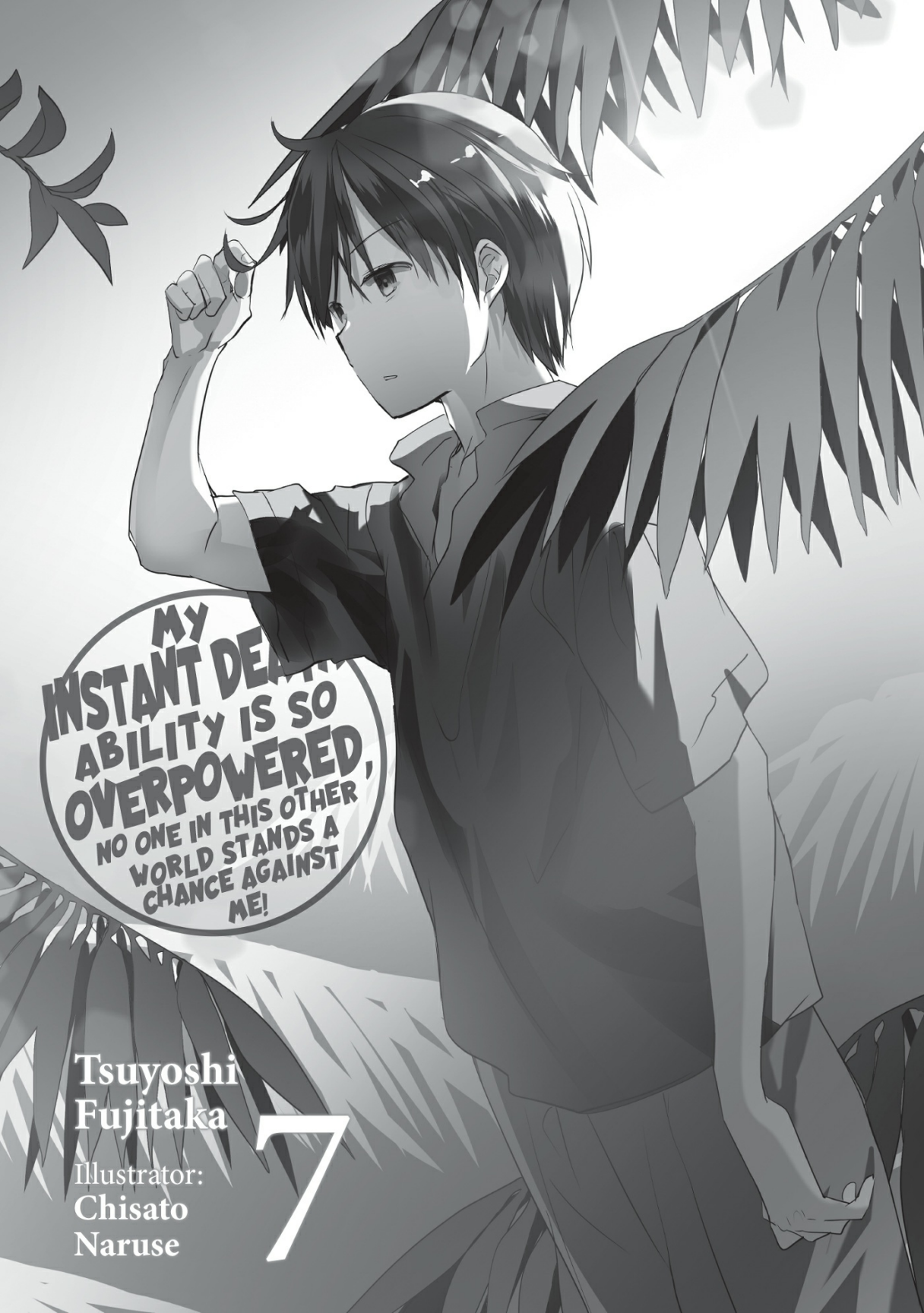
Chisato Naruse
My Instant Death Ability is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me!

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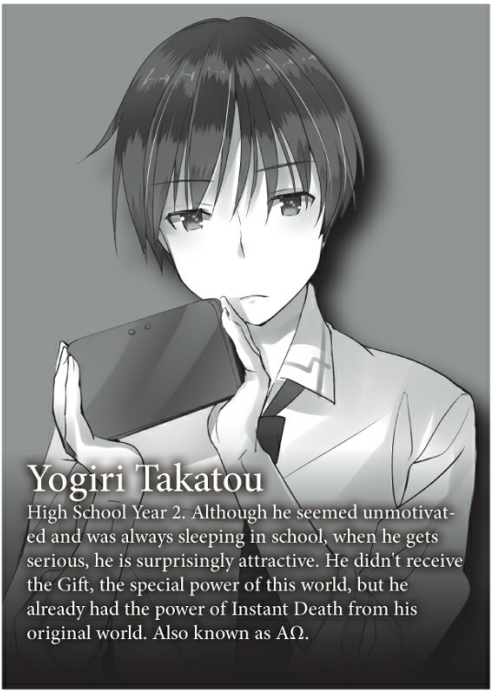
CHARACTERS

Tomochika Dannoura

High School Year 2. Although she looks quite attractive and has quite the ample chest, her role is unfortunately that of the Straight Man. Like Yogiri, she did not receive the power of the Gift, but she is trained in a martial art derived from the ancient Dannoura style of archery.

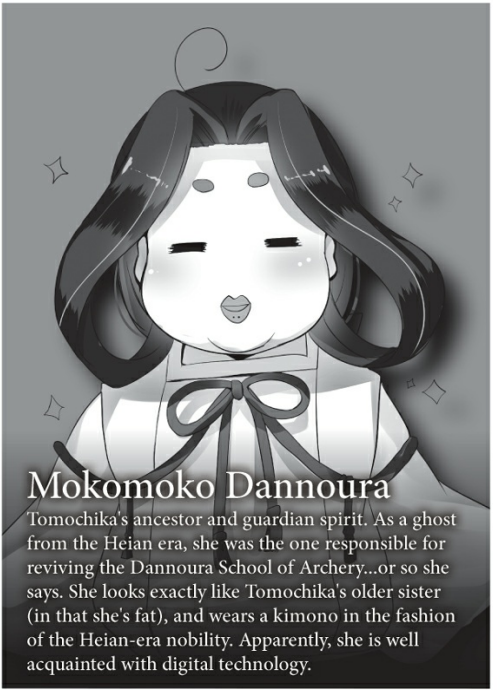


Yogiri Takatou

High School Year 2. Although he seemed unmotivated and was always sleeping in school, when he gets serious, he is surprisingly attractive. He didn't receive the Gift, the special power of this world, but he already had the power of Instant Death from his original world. Also known as AΩ.

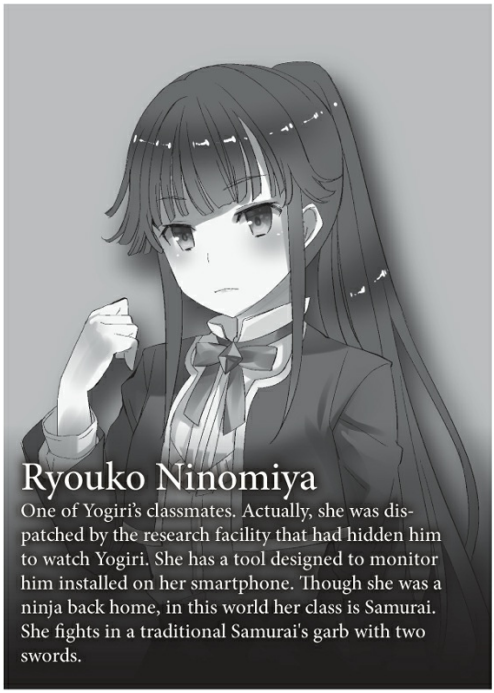
Asaka Takatou

A female college student who, while struggling to find work, ended up taking an interview at a suspicious institution known as the Independent Higher Life Form Research Facility, and unfortunately ended up finding work there. She normally ties her long hair up behind her head. At her new work place, she met AΩ, whom she named Yogiri.



Mokomoko Dannoura

Tomochika's ancestor and guardian spirit. As a ghost from the Heian era, she was the one responsible for reviving the Dannoura School of Archery...or so she says. She looks exactly like Tomochika's older sister (in that she's fat), and wears a kimono in the fashion of the Heian-era nobility. Apparently, she is well acquainted with digital technology.

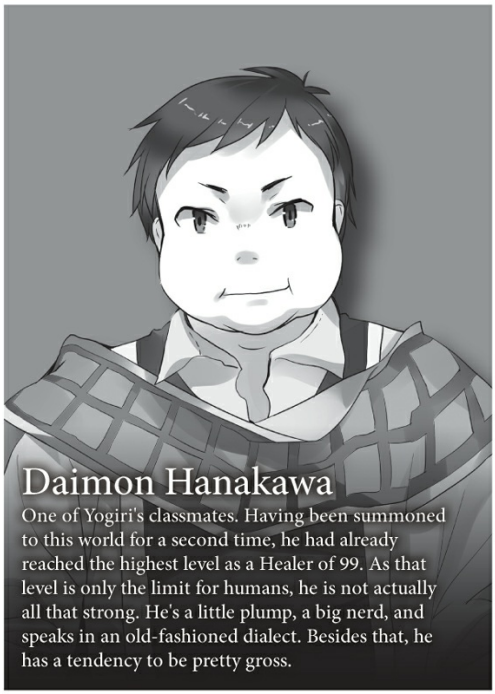


Ryouko Ninomiya

One of Yogiri's classmates. Actually, she was dispatched by the research facility that had hidden him to watch Yogiri. She has a tool designed to monitor him installed on her smartphone. Though she was a ninja back home, in this world her class is Samurai. She fights in a traditional Samurai's garb with two swords.

Enju Sumeragi

A girl who came to hide at the Independent Higher Order Lifeform Research Institute while Yogiri was living there with Asaka. One of the few people Yogiri grew attached to. For that reason, robots were made with her appearance to combat him. Part of the Sumeragi family, who rule Japan from the shadows.



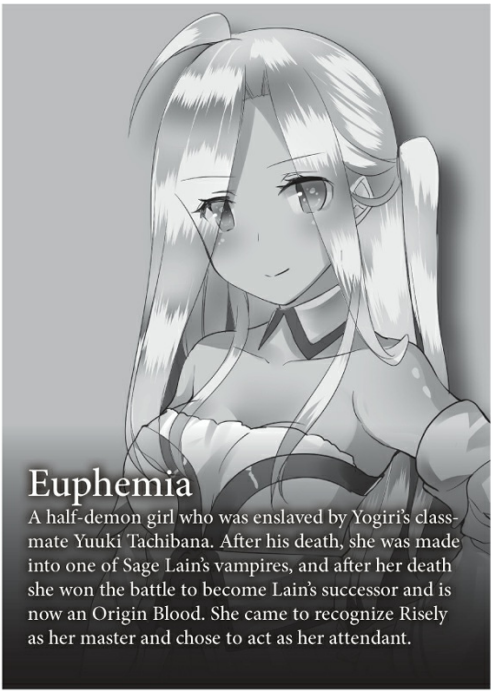
Daimon Hanakawa

One of Yogiri's classmates. Having been summoned to this world for a second time, he had already reached the highest level as a Healer of 99. As that level is only the limit for humans, he is not actually all that strong. He's a little plump, a big nerd, and speaks in an old-fashioned dialect. Besides that, he has a tendency to be pretty gross.

Carol S. Lane

One of Yogiri's classmates. An American who joined their class as she entered high school. Like Ryouko, she was tasked with monitoring Yogiri, but she works for the Agency. Her class in this world is Ninja, and she wears a red ninja outfit and forehead protector when fighting. Her weapon is a ninja sword.

CHARACTERS



Euphemia

A half-demon girl who was enslaved by Yogiri's classmate Yuuki Tachibana. After his death, she was made into one of Sage Lain's vampires, and after her death she won the battle to become Lain's successor and is now an Origin Blood. She came to recognize Risely as her master and chose to act as her attendant.

Risley

The Sage Lain, being the highest level of vampire known as an Origin Blood, challenged Yogiri in hopes he would be able to put an end to her immortality. As she wished, she died, and left behind this girl, a replica of herself modified to be her ideal. She only has a small part of Lain's memories.

Kouryu

One of the old gods who was defeated and driven out by Malnarilna. As the last survivor of the fallen dragons, he uses the name of his race as his own name. Most of his powers were sealed away by Rilna. He usually takes the form of a young boy but can also become an Eastern dragon.

Malnarilna

The god of the Malnarilna sect, and the one in charge of ruling this world. When appearing before their believers they take the form of a solemn old man, but in truth they are a pair of young girls. However, their thoughts only differ slightly, so they are effectively the same being.

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Chapter 1 — You're Just Going Too Far to Show Off Your Wealth

Everything was made of jewels and precious metals. The floor, the ceiling, and the pillars connecting them were all gold in color, set with precious stones all over. They were likely all real. Hanakawa didn't have an eye for identifying their authenticity. His Discernment skill only allowed him to look at the stats of others.

However, there is no way they are just glass balls plated with gold, right?

It was a throne room made for the emperor, who was also a Sage. There was no way they could get away with counterfeit goods. Enormous wealth must have gone into the place.

"So, whaddya think of my throne room?" the Sage and Emperor of Ent, Yoshifumi, asked as he sat down and leaned back on his throne. Naturally, the chair itself was terribly extravagant, boasting a mind-boggling air of luxury.

Yoshifumi's women crowded around, leaning up against him and the throne. Apparently, the women who had been with him at the bar were of enough standing to make it into the palace.

"Truly an awe-inspiring display of splendor! I cannot help but admire it!" Hanakawa was prostrating himself on the floor one step down from the throne.

"Come on, be honest."

"Huh? But those words were the honest, unadulterated truth, straight from my heart!"

"Really?" Yoshifumi seemed to be trying to threaten him, but he wasn't all that scary. His appearance and manner of speaking were those of a common thug, so there wasn't much that was intimidating about him. He was more funny than anything. He looked like some underling who had made it to the throne by mistake. Hanakawa couldn't possibly be afraid of someone like that.

But his companions were another matter. The women clinging to Yoshifumi's throne clearly had some sort of ability to read Hanakawa's thoughts. No matter what kind of flowery language or flattery he tried, there was always the possibility of his true feelings being exposed. That struck him with a sort of uncanny fear.

Ugh...should I just try to change the subject? Or perhaps I should speak my honest feelings, as I was instructed to do? Or even if my mind is being read, perhaps it would be best to continue pretending my previous words were the truth?

"Well...I feel like this much gold just makes it look foolish, like you are just going too far to show off your wealth. Or like a throne is ill-fitting for someone who looks so much like a common thug..." Hanakawa timidly admitted. If the emperor's entourage could read his thoughts anyway, there was no point in trying to hide them.

"What?!" Yoshifumi sounded furious.

"My apologies!" Hanakawa pressed his face into the floor. It was all over. He should have said something harmless and inoffensive after all.

But nothing happened.

I am starting to believe this development has become rather common. Once I lift my head, the situation will have completely changed, and I will have no idea what is going on!

Hanakawa slowly lifted his head. Yoshifumi was still staring angrily at him. Nothing had changed.

"You are still furious!" Hanakawa said with a shrill cry, dropping his head again so fast that his face practically bounced off the floor.

"Jeez, you're so annoying! Just look up!"

"As you wish." He quickly raised his face again.

"You really are shameless, aren't you?"

"Then what is it that I am supposed to do?"

Yoshifumi got angry when he was honest and got angry when he bowed down before him. Hanakawa had no idea what course of action to take. It didn't seem like there was anything left to try but defiance.

"Whatever. Do you know what a court jester is?"

"You mean like a clown who exists to entertain the king?" He remembered hearing about something like that in plays he had seen.

"Yeah, like that. I don't know much about them, but apparently they were

allowed to be as rude as they wanted. Kings are totally isolated. No one gives them anything but flattery. So they need someone like that around."

"I see. But what about it?"

"You're going to be my court jester. You can say whatever you want, and I'll guarantee your safety."

"No way!"

"What?!"

"W-Wait, you just said I could say anything, didn't you?!" Hanakawa protested through a small tremor in his voice.

"Oh...I guess I did. Does that count, though? Well, whatever. You have no right to refuse. If you leave the capital, I'll kill you. Your freedom is limited to the city."

"C-Can I really say whatever I wish?"

"Yeah. About me or anyone else. You won't get punished."

"I see...but why would you choose me?" Hanakawa wasn't naive enough to get full of himself after hearing that. His instincts told him he still needed to tread carefully.

"I'm a Sage and an emperor, so everyone always tries to flatter me, but you seem different. That's all."

"I see. Certainly, I have spoken my thoughts unintentionally already, so continuing to attempt to be polite seems impossible."

"Also, wear this." As Yoshifumi said that, one of the women beside him presented Hanakawa with some neatly folded clothes.

"This is...a clown's outfit, correct?"

"We made it just for you. 'Cause you're so fat, none of the stuff we had would fit you."

Hanakawa unfolded the clothes and looked at them. They reminded him of the joker one would draw from a deck of cards. While he didn't have much in the way of a fashion sense, it was gaudy enough to make even him hesitate.

"Take care of them. If you don't have those on, you're not the jester. Who knows what will happen if you're rude to me then?"

Yoshifumi had already made up his mind. It didn't seem like there was anything Hanakawa could do to resist.

Chapter 2 — Let's Just Keep Going! Let's Believe in Kouryu's Abilities!

The dragon described in Japan and China was a chimera built from multiple animals. It had the head of a camel, the antlers of a deer, the body of a snake, the scales of a carp, the feet of a tiger, and the talons of a hawk. Kouryu's dragon form was almost identical to those depictions.

Aboard this dragon were two humans and one android, flying over the sea. They weren't especially high in the air—-only a few meters over the surface of the water. They had just escaped from a sinking ship. Yogiri was in his school uniform, as always, while Tomochika and Enju wore swimsuits. They had been playing at the pool when pirates had attacked, and with everything that had happened since, they hadn't had a chance to change.

"Wasn't there an old folk tale in Japan like this?" Tomochika asked from where she sat between the other two.

"You mean Taro the Dragon Boy?" Yogiri answered from the front.

"Yeah, that! Wait, was his name Taro? I thought it was Kotaro?"

"Now that you mention it, both sound possible."

"I imagine his name was Kotaro," Enju said from the back. "I have heard the story of Kotaro of the Springs." The android, of course, was being controlled by Tomochika's ancestral spirit, Mokomoko.

"The opening of the anime version had kids riding on the back of a dragon, didn't it? I always wondered what that would be like, but it's not that great, is it?"

"Yeah, the scales are kind of sharp, so it hurts to sit on them."

"And he's a bit too big to sit on comfortably."

"I'd rather ride a western dragon. That gives you more of a feeling of being a dragon rider, don't you think? This is more like riding a snake. I don't even know how he's flying without wings."

"You mean like the wyvern you slew upon first reaching this world?" said Mokomoko. "Even that creature shouldn't have been able to fly, given the

way its body was constructed. It must have had some sort of mysterious power as well."

"Don't you guys think you're complaining a bit too much for a free ride?!" Kouryu finally cried, breaking his silence.

"As a mythical creature, don't you think you could make it a more comfortable experience?"

"People aren't supposed to ride me in the first place."

"You can already transform between human and dragon form," Tomochika replied, "so can't you transform to be a bit easier to sit on?"

"You're asking an awful lot considering I'm letting you ride at all!"

"But it would have been a problem for you if we went down with the ship, right?" Yogiri observed. "You want us to defeat the Sages for you, don't you?"

"It's not like I *need* you to do it," Kouryu muttered. "Some low-level Sages dying won't change anything. Wanting to see them die is just for entertainment."

"What connection do you have to the Sages?" Yogiri asked. He knew Kouryu wanted them to kill the powerful beings, but he hadn't given any reason for it.

"I suppose the only connection I have would be to the Great Sage. It's not like I have anything against the others. I just figure if they die, it'll bother him."

"Well, regardless of what you want, we're just collecting Philosopher's Stones. I don't really care what happens to the Sages themselves." It felt like Kouryu had dodged around the topic, but Yogiri didn't care enough to press him.

"By the way, you said something about knowing another way we can get home?" Tomochika asked, reminding Yogiri of the conversation they'd had earlier.

"I do. With this other method, you don't need to defeat the Sages or collect Philosopher's Stones."

"Seriously?! Were we just going to get to the end and then find out we didn't have to do any of that at all?!"

"Sounds like something you might see in a manga that got suddenly discontinued," Yogiri commented.

"But of course, I want to see you kill the Sages, so I can't tell you the

details right away!”

“Hey!”

“I’m not trying to be mean or anything. Collecting Philosopher’s Stones is probably the *easiest* way. And besides, you have no way to prove I’m telling the truth.”

“Well, I guess...”

“So you should keep fighting the Sages like you’ve been doing.”

“Even though you said getting rid of the Sages makes the world more dangerous?”

“Aha ha, I guess I shouldn’t have said that.”

“We should take everything this guy says with a grain of salt,” Yogiri cautioned his companions. “We can’t trust him completely, so we should probably keep looking for a way to get back ourselves.”

“We have no choice but to trust him to take us to land, at least.”

Kouryu continued flying in the direction the boat had been heading.

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“Are you sure we’re going the right way?”

About half a day had passed since they had escaped from the ship. Flying should have been faster than the cruise, but the scenery around them hadn’t changed at all. There was nothing but ocean everywhere, with no sign of land in sight.

“No idea,” Kouryu replied offhandedly.

“Hey!”

“I’m just flying in the same direction the boat was heading.”

“The ship was en route to Ent, so that should be the correct choice, but...” Mokomoko trailed off. They didn’t have any guarantee that the boat had been heading for the island in a straight line.

“Which way is east?!” Tomochika asked. “Oh, we can just check the sun! Except that it’s cloudy!”

“Even if you could see the sun, would that help you?” Yogiri answered. “We have no idea what direction the sun is in here, do we?”

“Oh! I just took it for granted that the sun always rises in the east! So where does it rise from in this world, Kouryu?”

“Huh? Is it always the same?” the dragon asked.

“This guy is totally useless!”

“Maybe if we gain some altitude, we can see some land.”

Kouryu was flying only a few meters above the water. With no obstacles, there was no need to fly any higher, but they couldn’t see very far like this.

“That’s not an option,” Kouryu replied. “If I fly too high, I’ll get caught by the Sages’ defense network.”

“You did mention that if you flew, the Sages would try to stop you. Does that mean it’s okay as long as you stay low?” Tomochika asked.

“This is just to make me feel better. I figured it might be harder to find us this close to the surface.”

“We haven’t been found out yet, so we’re probably fine...”

“Who knows? The area around Ent is part of Yoshifumi’s jurisdiction. There’s a chance this method won’t work there.”

Yogiri had thoroughly disabled the Sage Raiza, so flying in his territory was no longer a problem. That might have been the only reason they have been safe so far.

“Oh! Why don’t we just send Mokomoko up again?” Tomochika suggested. “She’s a spirit, so they probably won’t notice her. She did that earlier to find a city for us, right?”

“That won’t be possible while moving at such a high speed,” Mokomoko replied. “The coordinates would become an issue.”

“You’re useless!”

“You really have no respect for your ancestors, do you?”

“Why don’t we just have Kouryu slow down, then?”

“Because if I slow down, we’ll fall.”

“You’re useless too!”

“Let’s just stop,” Yogiri suggested. “You said you could make a boat out of Furemaru, right? Let’s take a break.”

“Furemaru” was short for “flexible material.” Mokomoko could alter the form of the mysterious material they had obtained from the robot aggressor at will. She had said earlier that she could make a boat with it.

“Sure, that’s possible, but I don’t think now is a good time for that,” Kouryu said.

“Why not?”

“Look at the sky.”

The three of them looked up as Kouryu had instructed. There was a thick

layer of clouds above them, but from a small gap in those clouds a beam of light was shining through.

"That looks a bit off to be the sun."

"It looks like some shining people..."

Tomochika saw them first, but soon enough Yogiri could make them out too. It was a group of people with wings. They had weapons in hand and were heading towards them.

"Angels?!"

"Nothing so fancy," Kouryu explained. "They're just automatic defense devices built by some idiot who likes to pretend to be a god."

Upon closer inspection, their skin had a glossy finish. Either they were covered from head to toe in armor or were made from armor-like material.

"There's no chance they just happened to come down to have a picnic or something, is there?"

"We're the only thing around, so it's highly unlikely they have an objective other than us."

"That's what I thought! Whoa!" Tomochika yelped as Kouryu abruptly changed course. A moment later, water shot up and sprayed them. Something had fallen right where they had been a moment earlier.

"Huh?" Tomochika's face was frozen in surprise. "What?! Hold on a second!" The angel-like beings were throwing spears at them, forcing Kouryu to dodge around them as he flew. "You're supposed to be a god, right, Kouryu?! Shouldn't you be able to make a barrier or something to block them?!"

"Sure, I can make barriers. The reason you're not being blown off my back by the wind is because I've got a barrier up to isolate you from the surrounding environment."

"But it won't work against those attacks?"

"It could handle some attacks, but taking one from them would be a bad idea."

"All right, then; they're just throwing spears, so they'll run out eventually, won't they? Wait, where are they getting more from?!"

"They may just be fakes, but they *are* fakes of angels. I'm sure they can make more themselves."

As Kouryu had confirmed, the moment the "angels" threw their spears, another spear would appear in their empty hands.

“Anyway, I can’t keep this up for too long, so I’d appreciate it if you did something about them, Yogiri!”

“Well, I guess a few of them are going to hit us.”

The lines of killing intent that Yogiri could see were becoming gradually more focused on them. The accuracy of the fake angels was slowly improving as they adjusted for Kouryu’s movements.

“Die.”

As Yogiri muttered the word, the angels suddenly lost all strength and fell from the sky. Plumes of water shot into the air as they impacted the ocean in quick succession.

“I feel like I’ve seen this before,” Tomochika muttered. “But wait! Why didn’t you just do that right away?!”

“I thought if Kouryu could dodge them, we could get away without having to kill them.”

“Hmm. It seems they appeared despite us maintaining a low altitude,” Mokomoko remarked. “As such, there should be no problem if we climb higher now, correct?” The fake angels had been completely wiped out, so there shouldn’t have been any danger in it.

“I suppose that’s true. You could also say that seeing them means we’ve entered another Sage’s domain.”

“Yeah, but we’re not getting any higher, are we?”

“Yeah, I’m kind of at my limit. Dodging around like that really took a lot out of me.” Rather than climbing higher, they were actually beginning to descend.

“Huh? What’s going on?!”

“We’re falling.”

“Wait, seriously?!”

They gradually dropped until Kouryu’s belly hit the water.

“Mokomoko, the boat! Make the boat!”

“Got it!” A black substance began to pour from Enju’s mouth. It spread out in a thin film, taking the form of a small rowboat resting on Kouryu’s back.

“Well, that was gross!”

“It was faster to hide Furemaru inside of the robot! Hurry up and get on!”

The three of them quickly climbed onto the boat.

“Wait, what am I supposed to do?” Kouryu asked.

“Can’t you just turn back into your human form?!”

“Not while I’m flying.”

“Let’s go!” The boat slipped off the dragon’s back and struck the water. Still carrying the momentum of Kouryu’s flight, they skipped forward across the surface of the ocean a few times before stopping.

“Kouryu!” Tomochika shouted, turning back.

He hadn’t accompanied them and had mostly sunk into the water, not making much progress. Then he vanished beneath the waves.

“Is he going to be okay?!”

“Well, he *did* used to be a god, so he’s probably fine.” Yogiri didn’t seem all that concerned.

“That’s kind of cold of you!”

“There’s nothing we can do, is there?”

“I guess not. Okay then, let’s just keep going! Let’s believe in Kouryu’s abilities!”

“You change your tune awfully fast, don’t you?” Mokomoko commented.

“Honestly, I can’t really worry that much about such a questionable guy who just popped up out of nowhere.”

“We have to make it to land so that we don’t put his sacrifice to waste,” Yogiri said. “Mokomoko, can you go up and take a look?”

“Perhaps I am in no position to talk, but what is with these two?” Mokomoko muttered as she left Enju and floated up into the sky.

Yes, I can see land! she called a moment later as her usual ghostly self.

They had no idea if the land in question was Ent, but they decided to head there for the moment.

Chapter 3 — Things Are Happening So Suddenly, I Can't Follow What's Going On!

The small boat made from Furemaru slowly made its way to land.

"Weren't we moving a lot smoother just before?" Tomochika asked as she rowed with an oar that was also made from Furemaru.

"Indeed," Mokomoko replied, using Enju to row alongside her. "While it can utilize most things as a source of energy, it is not a perpetual motion machine. It requires some time to charge. Currently, its energy stores have been exhausted."

"I thought making a boat out of Furemaru would solve most of our problems, but I feel like we're still walking on thin ice here!"

"We can see land, so we're almost there," Yogiri said, looking on.

"And why are you just watching us do the work?"

"One person on each side is enough, isn't it? If I helped too, it would throw off the balance."

"And taking the boy's stamina into account, with him rowing, we wouldn't make it very far."

"I have to say, I think I like my guys to be more reliable!"

"In many ways, he is incredibly reliable, don't you think?"

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As Mokomoko said that, looking back, Tomochika turned to follow her gaze. Something enormous was floating in the water behind them. It was a strange-looking creature, with the body of a shark but arms like a human. There were also plenty of creatures with numerous tentacles, like squid or octopi, floating among the waves.

"Ohhh! It's like a seafood buffet!" Tomochika remarked.

"Even the Dannoura School has little it can do on the open ocean. Without the boy, we would have been consumed long ago."

"Isn't this ocean way too dangerous?!"

Truthfully, Tomochika didn't even understand just how dangerous this world was. After all, Yogiri dealt with most issues as soon as they arose, and any arrogant, self-important enemies who appeared in front of them died immediately. They had defeated numerous powerful foes along the way, but since those villains had all died immediately, Tomochika had no idea how strong they had really been. So she didn't understand the threat this sea life posed to them either.

"Hmm. While they don't seem to be everywhere, it would still be incredibly reckless for a novice to attempt to cross the ocean. At this rate, I begin to worry about Kouryu's well-being."

"He's a dragon, so he'll be fine, right?"

"No point in worrying about it."

"You two..."

As they spoke, they came up against land. Kouryu had brought them rather close to their destination. The boat continued forward, running aground on the beach.

"I'm glad we didn't run into a cliff or something," Tomochika commented. If they had, they would have had a difficult time making it out of the water.

"Well, we're okay for now, but the real problem is what to do next."

Their objective was to reach the Empire of Ent, an eastern island country, and take the Philosopher's Stone from the Sage who resided there. The cruise ship they had been on had been heading there, but after it sank, they hadn't had a clear idea of where to go.

"For now, let us wait for Furemaru to recharge so we can transform it into a state that will allow us to carry it," Mokomoko suggested.

It seemed they wouldn't be able to go anywhere for a while. Thinking that

now was her time to shine, Tomochika looked around. Although they could rely on Yogiri's ability to detect killing intent that was aimed at them, her eyesight was still useful for seeing across long distances.

There were no people around. A calm, sandy beach stretched out before them, turning to hills a short distance away. The hills turned then to bare rock, which continued to slope gently upwards, stretching higher for a considerable distance.

"I can't see anything but beach, hills, and the sea."

"It's hard to tell if this place is inhabited, then."

"It doesn't look especially dangerous, but what do you think, Takatou?"

"Hmm. I don't sense any killing intent, so I don't think we're going to suddenly get attacked or anything."

So far, Yogiri's ability to detect killing intent had never been wrong, so that alone was reassuring to hear.

"Hm. I should be able to transform Furemaru a few times now, then we'll be able to carry it out," Mokomoko reported as Tomochika kept watch around them.

"Can you make an enclosure for me, then? I'm sick of wearing this swimsuit."

"There is no one around. Why don't you just change here?"

"If you don't want me to look, I can just turn around," Yogiri offered.

"No...it's not that I don't trust you, Takatou, but changing in such a wide-open place like this is unsettling."

"Goodness. If you are still embarrassed about simply having your breasts exposed, life will be difficult from here on out," Mokomoko muttered as she transformed Furemaru into an enclosure for her descendant.

"And where exactly are we going where that's a problem?! Wouldn't it be more of a problem if I *wasn't* embarrassed?!"

They had changes of clothes in the backpack Yogiri was carrying. It could carry a lot more than it looked like, so all of their belongings were inside it.

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After Tomochika and Enju had changed, Mokomoko turned Furemaru back into parts of their outfits. They were primarily using it to protect Tomochika. The only reason it had been inside Enju earlier was because

Tomochika had been wearing her swimsuit.

"Wasn't it a lot bigger than this?"

"Making it the size of that boat involved stretching it out long and thin, leaving it hollow. If compressed, it is rather small. It still maintains a measure of strength when spread out like that, but of course it has its limits."

"All right, let's go."

Yogiri headed off first, Tomochika and Mokomoko following close behind him. With a surprising amount of difficulty, they made it out of the sand and onto the rocky surface of the hills. The slope wasn't very steep, but it was a considerable distance to the top.

"It doesn't look like there's anywhere else we can go, does it?"

Yogiri looked around, as if already tired of climbing. The hill stretched out in both directions, so either way they would end up having to summit it.

After climbing for a while, they finally reached the top.

"It doesn't look like there are any people around here..."

An enormous basin was stretched out in front of them. It was mostly comprised of dirt and stone, the rolling landscape blocking their view of it. Inside the basin were numerous pits ringed with mountains that looked like craters.

"Hm. I imagine this basin is a crater itself," Mokomoko posited. "That would make this the edge of it."

"So after a huge meteor hit, a bunch of smaller ones followed it?"

"Not necessarily a meteor. Something with enormous energy like a nuclear explosion could have a similar effect on the landscape."

"Putting aside the speculation, what do we do now? I'm kind of at a loss as to what happens next."

Yogiri had hoped they would find a clue about what to do once they reached the top, but with nothing but barren land before them, he had no idea.

"Doesn't that look sort of like a road?" Tomochika asked, pointing at the basin. Looking closely, they could see a small line winding around the mountains and craters.

"Hm...it does look like it has been maintained artificially," Mokomoko replied. "I doubt such a thing would occur in nature by chance."

"Any idea where it goes?"

"I attempted to check from above, but the shape of the landscape makes it hard to follow."

“I guess we have no choice but to go down ourselves.”

They began to descend the slope. The inside of the crater had been gouged out significantly steeper than the outside, so climbing down took longer than going up.

Once they made it down, the road was obvious. It hadn’t been paved, but it had been cleared, and the tracks of something like carriage wheels could be seen running down it. It appeared to be seeing some use, so there was no doubt there was intelligent life nearby.

“It’s nice that we know it’s not a deserted island, but which direction do we go in?” Tomochika asked. Their first destination would be a settlement of some sort, but there was no clue as to which direction such a place lay in. Both ends of the road disappeared behind the mountains around them.

“There is nothing to do but rely on our intuition... Oh. It appears something is approaching us.” Mokomoko turned to her left. A carriage was barreling down the road towards them, its driver desperately whipping a horse that was all but foaming at the mouth with the exertion of it.

“What is that?!”

“Looks like they’re chasing him,” Yogiri mused. A number of people on horses were following the carriage at a rapid pace. “Are they bandits or something? We haven’t had an otherworld fantasy development like this before, have we?”

“Is this fantasy?! I’m pretty sure you could see something like this only a hundred years ago back home!”

There were five pursuers. They were men with hair cut into mohawks, wielding axes and wearing spiked shoulder guards. They chased the carriage, letting out wild cries as they ran.

“That’s a pretty shabby looking carriage,” Yogiri said. “If this was an actual otherworld fantasy, they’d be royalty or something, but the chances of that don’t look so good.”

“You have a pretty biased view of other worlds, don’t you? But more importantly, what are we going to do about it?!”

Yogiri gave her a confused look. “Do we have to do anything?”

“Huh? Shouldn’t we help someone if they’re being chased by bandits?”

“We don’t know that they’re bandits, so we can’t say which of them is in the wrong.”

“Okay, come on! They’re hooting and hollering and waving axes around!”

“That’s not enough to prove they’re bad people. Mohawks could just be a cultural hairstyle.”

“I mean, that’s true, but...” Even if this was a bandit-related event, there was always the possibility that the carriage driver was the thief, and the riders pursuing him were the victims. It was true that they couldn’t pass judgment at a glance. But it still seemed like something bad was happening, so it would gnaw at her conscience to do nothing.

As Tomochika considered their options, the carriage flew past them. Ignoring the three of them, the pursuers continued after it. Although there was nothing much they could do at that point, Tomochika turned to watch.

Someone had appeared on the road in front of the carriage: a young girl holding two shields. She was running straight towards the charging vehicle, with no apparent intention of dodging. Tomochika thought she might have intended to jump aside at the last second, but the girl just lifted her shields in front of her. It seemed like she was planning on blocking the carriage with them.

She was rather small, and the shields weren’t that large. Common sense would say that trying to stop a runaway carriage in such a way was ridiculous, but her face was brimming with confidence.

“Die, Yogiri Takatou!” the girl shouted as she struck the carriage, sending the whole thing flying up into the air.

Having deflected the vehicle, she continued through to strike the riders chasing it before coming to a stop. The carriage had made it a fair distance away from the three of them, but it landed with a loud crash in front of them.

“Things are happening so suddenly, I can’t follow what’s going on!”

“It sounded like she shouted my name.”

“Perhaps there is no need to confirm this, but as you might imagine, they have all perished,” Mokomoko observed.

The driver of the carriage and his pursuers had been ordinary humans, so they hadn’t been able to survive the fall from such a height.

“Now what?” Tomochika asked.

“Should we make a grave for them?”

“That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said when confronted with dead bodies yet!”

“I wouldn’t bother burying someone I had killed myself, but these people are unrelated to us.”

“Are they really, though? She did call out your name as she struck them,” Mokomoko said.

The three of them turned to look at the girl. She was jumping for joy, as if she had finally accomplished something.

“We probably shouldn’t get involved with her...” Tomochika warned the others.

“Let’s go back in the other direction,” Yogiri agreed.

They began walking towards where the carriage had come from.

“What?! The Yogiri Takatou Signal hasn’t disappeared yet!” they heard a voice call out from behind them. “Is he inside the carriage?”

“Takatou...”

“Yeah, it looks like we might be getting involved after all.”

As they spoke, they continued walking, trying to get as far from the girl as possible.

“The carriage only has luggage inside...which means... Hey, you people!” There was no one else there except for their group, so there was no doubt she was talking to them.

“She’s talking to us, by the way.”

“If we ignore her, she’ll probably charge us, right?” Yogiri sighed. “What is it?”

He turned to talk to her, and Tomochika followed suit. The girl came up to stand in front of them immediately. She was rather small. Her appearance suggested she was just a girl from a simple rural village, but the two shields she carried stood out. They seemed to be the only thing like armor she had on her, and she had no weapons at all.

“Are you Yogiri Takatou?!”

He hesitated for a moment before answering, as if deciding whether to tell the truth or not. “Yes. What do you want?”

“Shouldn’t a villain like you be riding a runaway carriage and laughing maniacally or something?! What were you thinking, walking around pretending to be an ordinary person?!”

“You don’t see people that angry at you for doing nothing very often, do you?” Tomochika quipped.

“I don’t know what to say,” Yogiri shrugged. “I feel like you’re the villain here. It’s pretty cruel of you to kill a whole bunch of people because you mistook them for me.”

“W-Well...” When Yogiri pointed that out, the girl seemed to panic somewhat. “I-I’m doing it for justice, so...”

“That’s the best you can come up with?” demanded Tomochika.

“For the sake of ‘justice,’ you just kill unrelated people who were unprepared for a fight?”

“Urrghh...God, help me!”

Pushed back into a corner, the young girl suddenly dropped to her knees and began praying. It was hard to believe that praying to God like that would be of any use, but after a short time, she climbed back to her feet with a smile.

“It’s okay! I’ve been given a new power! If I make a mistake, I can try again! Shield Resurrection!”

She lifted both of her shields above her head. They began to glow, shedding light on everything around them. The fact that Yogiri wasn’t reacting must have meant that it wasn’t an attack. After a short while, the fallen men began to move.

“Did she just bring them back to life?!”

“She did say ‘resurrection,’ so probably.”

The revived men sat there in a daze for a few moments but soon got a hold of themselves. The man from the carriage immediately ran away, while his mohawked pursuers began searching through his now discarded vehicle. While they didn’t quite understand what was going on, it seemed the conflict was revolving around their cargo.

“So? Now there’s no problem, right?”

“I’m not sure that’s the case, but anyway, who are you?”

“I am Vivian, apostle of Malnarilna! My god has granted me these powers and bestowed upon me a great mission: to rid the world of your wickedness, Yogiri Takatou!” Vivian declared, thrusting a shield forward to point at him.

Chapter 4 — She's So Gullible, It's Kind of Unnerving!

Vivian didn't seem like an especially bad person, but she accepted whatever this god told her without thinking about whether what she was doing was right or wrong.

I'm not good with people like this, Yogiri thought to himself. If she attacked them, he would have no choice but to kill her, but he felt bad about killing someone who was so densely straightforward.

"I guess I can't deny that I'm a danger to the world, but do you actually know who I am?" he asked.

It didn't seem like she was impossible to reason with, so he decided to try talking to her first. She said she had received a revelation from God, and she clearly had a way to find him, so he figured he should get as much information as possible.

"You're a mass murderer who kills anyone regardless of age or gender, right?"

"That's it?"

"What do you mean, 'that's it'?! That's more than enough of a reason to eliminate you!"

It was pretty cruel for someone to have sent her to kill Yogiri without telling her about his abilities. Trying to fight him without any sort of countermeasures in place was suicide.

"What proof do you have that I'm a mass murderer?" he asked. "Did you see me kill anyone?"

"Are you really going to act like nothing happened?" Tomochika muttered with a sigh. But to Yogiri, Vivian's attitude was somewhat irritating. Sure, he had killed people, but that had nothing to do with this woman, who had suddenly appeared. She had no right to proclaim him guilty of anything.

"Proof or not, if Malnarilna said so, it's one hundred percent the truth!" Vivian declared.

Malnarilna, the name of the chief god of the eponymous religion, was the most well-known god in this world. Although the Malnarilna sect came second in scope to the Axis Church as a religious institution, the Church worshiped an enormous pillar that supposedly existed at the center of the world, not a god with thoughts and feelings of its own. As such, Malnarilna was the most revered *god*, so even someone outside of the sect would have no reason to doubt a revelation given by them.

I guess I can't just say I doubt that they're actually God...

Feeling like it wasn't his place to call another's faith into question, Yogiri decided to leave it at that.

"And I can see the Yogiri Takatou Signal, so there's no way I'd mistake you for someone else."

"Okay, hold on, you just mistook a whole bunch of people for him a second ago, didn't you?!" Tomochika blurted out, unable to hold back any longer.

"I couldn't help it! The signal isn't that precise! But when everyone else died and the signal was still there, since you were the only guy left, by process of elimination that must mean that you are Yogiri Takatou!"

"So, if you're planning on eliminating me, that means killing me, right? You're talking an awful lot if that's the case."

"Ha! I'm not a murderer like you, so I would never kill someone who didn't attack me first!"

"Except for that guy in the carriage, I guess?" Tomochika commented again.

"Y-You could call that an attack against me! So bring it on! These shields can reflect any kind of attack! Yogiri Takatou, you will die by your own power!"

"No thanks."

"Wh-What?!"

"I don't use my power on people unless they attack me first either," Yogiri replied.

"All right," Tomochika sighed again. "If neither of you will attack first, can we leave?"

"You can't just leave!"

"Then what are you going to do?" asked Yogiri.

"Well...when you try to kill another innocent person, I'll step in and

defend them! Yeah! That way I can protect someone and also put an end to a mass murderer!"

"That sounds like a pretty roundabout way of doing things. You aren't going to do anything to me now, right?"

"I mean..."

"This is becoming remarkably tedious," Mokomoko interjected, clearly fed up as well.

"Hey, hey, what's this all about?"

Just as Yogiri had decided they could leave this girl alone, a man's voice called out to them. He had completely forgotten about the mohawked men, but they seemed to have finished their business with the carriage's cargo. They had apparently taken notice of the four of them making a ruckus on the side of the road.

The five men walked over to them.

"Heh heh. Isn't this a nice bit of roadside luxury? We've got three young girls here."

"Looks like they were just plain old thugs attacking that carriage after all!" Tomochika observed.

"I was just saying it was possible," Yogiri said defensively, feeling like he was being criticized.

"Now what?"

"They'll probably attack us, so I'll have to fight back."

But when he did that, Vivian would try to intervene. His power only worked against the target he had in mind, but he had never had someone try to intervene when he activated it. He was confident that his intended target would still die, but he couldn't guarantee he wouldn't kill her in the process.

Killing intent began to swell up from the bandits.

"What do we do with the guy?"

"No point in bringing him with us."

"I guess we'll just deal with him right away, then!"

There was the possibility of death. Yogiri couldn't tell what his opponents were thinking, but when they decided to kill him and those thoughts translated to actions, the probability of him dying increased. He could detect that probability as a fine black mist or black lines. But the line of death coming from the man passed clearly by him, not even grazing Yogiri. In short, the guy would miss. He clearly intended to kill Yogiri, so Yogiri would

have no problem killing him anyway, but he hesitated to do so. That would give Vivian exactly what she wanted.

So he decided to wait and see what would happen, but for some reason Vivian sprang into action. Jumping between the man and Yogiri, she intercepted the knife the thug had thrown with her shield. The knife bounced back, hitting the man in the chest. It punched straight through, then through another of the men standing behind him, before flying off into the distance. The man's attack couldn't have had that much strength behind it, so it seemed that her ability was to amplify the power of attacks she blocked before reflecting them.

"I'm the one who is going to defeat Yogiri Takatou! Stay out of my way!"

"What is she, a shonen manga rival?! Are you going to tell me she joins the party later too?!"

As expected, the other men weren't interested in picking a fight with them after that. The three survivors made a panicked retreat.

"Uhh, I only use my power to defend myself, but if you protect me, I'll never get to use it. Doesn't that make it hard for you to complete your objective?" Yogiri asked, not at all intending for the question to be a taunt.

"B-But you're super evil, so someday your desire for murder will be uncontainable, and your true nature will be on full display!"

Yogiri was at a loss. It didn't seem like she planned on attacking him, but she was clearly going to follow him around. And if she could roughly tell where he was, it would be pretty hard to lose her.

I guess if she's not going to hurt anyone, it doesn't matter if she follows us.

He decided to see if he could make use of her instead. "Vivian, is this the Empire of Ent?"

"Who knows? I don't know where they draw their borders, but there is a place called the Empire of Ent on this island."

"Are there any cities around here? If there are, can you take us to one? We don't know anything about the area, so we don't know where to go to find any people."

"What? Why should I guide you around?!"

"If you want to see if I'm really a mass murderer, you have to watch me when I'm around other people, don't you? If we just sit here and stare at each other, I'm not going to be killing anyone."

“I-I suppose that’s true. Fine! I’ll take you there!”
“She’s so gullible, it’s kind of unnerving!” Tomochika commented.
Making use of her was incredibly easy.

Chapter 5 — Infinity Shield! The Power to Call Forth Unlimited Shields!

Vivian walked in the lead with the other three following behind her. At some point, they had started climbing another hill, the road they were following leading up one of the many bald mountains in the basin.

"It's pretty far, isn't it? We're heading to the city where you live, Vivian?" Tomochika asked.

"I thought it was pretty close, seeing as you ran here," said Yogiri.

The slope was gentle so it didn't seem like the mountain was all that tall, but not knowing where they were going made it feel a little more strenuous.

"I just got excited when I saw the Yogiri Takatou Signal!"

"What exactly is this Yogiri Takatou Signal?" he finally asked, having heard the strange term numerous times now.

"If I close my eyes, I can see a vague purple color coming from the direction you're in. It gets thicker and clearer as you get closer."

Vivian stopped and closed her eyes as if she wanted to demonstrate it. Yogiri began walking in a circle around her, but even with her eyes closed, she had no problem following his movements.

"What do you think? There's no way you can escape me!"

"Was that also a power given to you by God?"

"Yes! In addition to the unique blessing given to each apostle, we are also given the Yogiri Takatou Signal!"

"The name 'apostle' really makes you think there are a number of you guys, doesn't it?"

It may have been unrelated to the apostles Vivian was talking about, but Yogiri couldn't help but think of the Twelve Disciples.

"Correct! I don't know how many there are, but I am definitely not the only one!"

Are we going to have a whole bunch of people start following us around? Back home, Yogiri had dealt with all sorts of folks trying to kill him, but they

had never been able to track him so easily. And if that tracking ability was a power given to them by a god, it wouldn't be that easy for him to avoid. It was starting to sound like a real nuisance.

"When did you get this power?"

"This morning. Wait, no, last night? Malnarilna came to me in a dream! I was told that the villain Yogiri Takatou would be coming to this land!"

"So the people with that power only exist in this country?"

"Judging from the timing, that would seem to be the case," Mokomoko answered.

"But why is this god or whatever suddenly paying attention to me?"

"Maybe they're sick of your behavior..." Tomochika offered, giving him a pitying look.

"Maybe I killed one of their followers, and they're angry with me over it."

But if that was the case, they should have tried to punish him directly. He felt like investing power in some apostle and sending them was too indirect. *Or maybe they're on guard against my power?* If they only sent empowered disciples after him, his power would never reach them directly. If they understood that, it was quite likely things would get much more irritating as they continued using roundabout methods to reach him.

"For someone calling me a villain, you seem awfully easygoing about spending time with me," he noted. It was strange. If he was a villain fit to be singled out by a god, Vivian should have been more afraid of him, but she seemed certain she wouldn't become a casualty herself.

"Because whoever my opponent is, it's no problem for me! I have resistances to everything and can reflect any attack! Oh, and that's not just my shields. My body is invincible too!" she declared proudly, puffed up with self-confidence.

"What do you think?" Tomochika whispered. "Will your power work on her?"

"No idea. I can't tell until I try," he whispered back, "though I've never met someone it didn't work on before."

"At any rate, you seem rather lazy, Yogiri Takatou! For a hill like this to have you out of breath, you must be incredibly out of shape!"

Now that she mentioned it, Yogiri was the only one who seemed tired. Tomochika had always had quite a bit of endurance, and the robot that Mokomoko was controlling couldn't get tired.

“I can’t help it. People don’t normally climb mountains in their everyday lives. Wait, you don’t get tired because you’re a robot, right Mokomoko? Could you carry me?”

“You’re going to paint an awful picture here, Takatou.”

“Jeez...fine. I’ll lend you one of my shields,” Vivian cut in.

“Uh, sorry. I don’t follow.” He would have understood if she had offered to lend him a staff or something, but he had no idea what to do with a shield.

“Wait, where did you even get that?” Tomochika asked. “You weren’t holding it earlier, were you?”

The previously empty-handed Vivian was now holding a shield.

“Heh! I possess the ability Infinity Shield: the power to call forth unlimited shields! I can create and erase them at will!”

“You know, the way she just adds the word ‘shield’ to everything kind of reminds me of the Dannoura School a little bit...” Tomochika observed.

“Please don’t associate us with the likes of her,” said Mokomoko.

“So how will a shield help me climb a mountain?”

“You throw it and then climb on!”

“Is this kid stupid or something?!” Tomochika asked bluntly.

“How rude! Malnarilna even showed me how to use it! Watch!”

Vivian threw the shield, and then quickly jumped onto it. The fact that she was agile enough to accomplish the move made one think she would be better off just running. The shield flew straight forward, then returned with the same vigor.

“Oh! The Boomerang Shield power activated, so it just ended up coming back!” she cried, clutching her head as she ended up right back at their side.

Yogiri was at a loss for words. “I was a bit on guard since she seemed so suspicious, but I guess she isn’t really a threat, is she?”

“Not that we can let our guard down,” Tomochika added. Even if Vivian herself wasn’t a danger to them, they couldn’t ignore the power working behind her.

“Wait, if I put the shields on my feet, can I make them spin like wheels?” The girl continued talking to herself.

“Okay, putting aside what the shields can do for now, how far away is the city?” Yogiri asked.

“It’s right over the mountain.”

“Is there nothing closer than that? Like where the carriage came from?”

“There is, but it would be irresponsible to lead a villain like you to such a place!”

“I don’t really care where it is. We just want information, so I guess we can ask you directly.”

“What? And what evil deed do you plan to commit after collecting my information, you pervert?!”

“We’re not interested in you personally at all.”

“Well, that is just rude!”

“I want to know about this country. Like where are we, where is the capital, and where is the emperor?”

“And what would you do if you knew? Are you plotting to head to the capital and assassinate the emperor?!”

Judging from their experience thus far, it was highly likely they would end up fighting the Sage and Emperor Yoshifumi when they met, so Yogiri had a difficult time arguing with her.

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The island of Ent was long and thin, stretching from east to west and divided into two large territories named East Ent and West Ent. Originally, the boundary between the two hadn’t been particularly clear, but with the arrival of the Sage Yoshifumi, it had been made very precise. A crevice almost large enough to split the island had appeared in its center, so now travel between the two sides was limited. The current capital was in the east, while Yogiri and Tomochika had arrived at the southern end of West Ent.

Yoshifumi had come here and made himself the emperor of Ent about ten years earlier. Up until that point, a single family had ruled over the island, but Yoshifumi had deposed them. Most of the people who had lived there were driven into West Ent at that time, and according to them, the east was now populated mostly by savages.

“So we refuse to recognize the Empire of Ent!” Vivian explained as they once again started climbing the mountain, their guide offering a simple explanation of the area’s history.

“Putting that aside for now, I guess we’re in the west,” said Yogiri. “Things look pretty bleak here.” They could see nothing but stone and earth, with no sources of water. It would be difficult to survive in a land like this.

“That’s all because of that guy, Yoshifumi. Just like it looks, you can’t survive using normal means.”

“Then how do you live here?”

“You either receive charity or steal it for yourself. You saw what happened earlier, right?”

“You mean those guys with the mohawks?”

“That was an adventurer with the merchant role and a band of ruffians.”

“By adventurer, you mean the kind that hunts monsters?” Tomochika asked. It was a common enough term in video games, but she wasn’t sure what it meant in this context.

“Yes. They go on adventures for personal gain on the western side of the island.”

She explained that adventurers were divided into numerous occupations and undertook an activity known as “adventuring” in West Ent. The people in the west could be rewarded by assisting those adventurers in their work.

“The ruffians are the ones who turned up their nose at charity and decided to live by taking what they want by force. That might make it sound like a proud choice, but in the end they are still scum who rely on the same system as the adventurers.”

The ruffians weren’t just people who chose to loot and pillage. They had specialized equipment and power on the same level as adventurers.

“Are roles different from the classes of the Gift?” Tomochika asked.

“A role is just like a job. It doesn’t give them any particular powers.” But by doing things that aligned with one’s role, they could receive contribution points. Those points could then be traded for goods or special privileges. “So the people of the former kingdom had no choice but to take the roles of regular townsfolk or ruffians.”

On its surface, that might have almost sounded fun, but the circumstances of the ordinary citizens were miserable. Even this island had places that were rich in water and greenery, but they were inhabited by monsters, placing them out of reach of the common folk. Even producing enough food to survive was difficult, and on top of that they had to deal with ruffians trying to steal what little they had. So they had no choice but to rely on the protection of adventurers, only able to survive by serving them.

“If that’s how things are, wouldn’t everyone be happy if the emperor died?”

“I guess that’s true! Wait, but I feel like a revolution led by a terrible person would also be a problem...”

“You said that it’s difficult to travel between the eastern and western sides of the island,” Yogiri said, “but that means it’s not impossible.”

“Even with a huge crevice between them, you could probably just go by boat,” Tomochika pointed out.

“The sea around us is a lair for enormous sea monsters,” Vivian explained. “A ship would be sunk moments after it departed!”

Tomochika wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that. “We already killed them on our way here...”

“Making it through with the boat we made may be a challenge with the way the ocean currents are laid out here,” Mokomoko added. The boat they had made from Furemaru wasn’t really capable of moving through the sea on its own power, and since the people of West Ent effectively ignored the water, there weren’t really any boats around.

“Does that crevice split the whole island in two?” Yogiri asked.

“No, it’s only in the center. But north of that is a mountain range, and south of it is the Elven Forest. It’s hard going whichever path you choose!”

“I really don’t like mountains...” Even this gentle slope had Yogiri totally exhausted. He had no chance when it came to actual mountain climbing.

“There are elves here?!” Tomochika shouted.

“That’s quite a reaction.”

“I mean, we’re talking about elves! Isn’t that, like, a hallmark of fantasy?!”

“I feel like we’ve already come across a lot of fantasy races.”

They had encountered zombies, beastkin, and vampires along the way. But to Tomochika, elves were on a whole other level.

“So, why can’t we go through the Elven Forest?” she asked. “Is it, like, ‘We will not permit you to trespass in our sacred forest, human scum!’ or something like that?!”

“Do you like elves or something, Dannoura?”

“If I can choose my race in games, I only ever pick elves.”

“I don’t know if they would say something like that, but generally anyone who enters the forest is killed. People who have gone to take a look out of curiosity could only run away, barely escaping with their lives, at best. I’ve never heard of anyone making it through the forest. If we could casually walk

through it, we'd be able to put much more pressure on the east."

"Well, the forest sounds better than the mountains. They both sound difficult, but flat ground seems like a better option. And if we're already in the south, the forest is closer anyway."

"Yogiri Takatou, were you even listening to me?! I told you it's too dangerous!"

"Why does it matter to you if I'm in danger? Since you won't attack me if I don't do anything, isn't it better for you if I end up getting killed somewhere?"

"Like I said, it's a problem if you die on your own! I have to be the one to defeat you!"

"You're really stuck on that, huh?"

"Well—" As she was about to go on, they finally reached the top of the mountain. "Look! We just need to climb down the other side. You can already see the city... Hey, what is happening?!"

They could certainly see the city. But a thick plume of smoke was billowing up from it.

"A fire?"

"It seems like a lot more smoke than what's normal."

"Yogiri Takatou! Is this your doing?! How dare you do this to them!"

"Why would you think I did something to a city I've never seen and didn't even know existed?"

At first, he had found her manner kind of amusing, but if she was going to keep going on like this forever, it was going to get old fast.

Chapter 6 — Why Is Everyone in the World like This?!

“A-Anyway, we have to hurry! Let’s go!”

“Why?”

“What?” Vivian had clearly intended for them to all run to the city together, so Yogiri’s response took her completely by surprise.

“I’m tired from climbing the mountain. Why should I hurry off to help put out a fire in a city I’ve never been to before?”

“You! You really are a villain, Yogiri Takatou! Normally, anyone would help to put out a fire! Whatever!”

With that, Vivian took off running at an incredible speed. The powers of an apostle seemed rather impressive.

“Takatou...”

“I mean, it’s not like we could keep up with her anyway.”

“Sure, but you could have said it a bit nicer.”

“We’ve kind of been acting friendly, but she *is* an enemy who wants to kill me, so I don’t feel like we should get that close to her.”

“I guess you’re right. She already feels like a friend...”

“Still,” Mokomoko interjected, “I am curious about what is occurring in that city. As such...”

A black shadow stretched out from Enju’s feet, making the shape of a board. It was her part of Furemaru transforming.

“Creating something like an automobile would be difficult, but if we only need to descend the mountain, it should be relatively easy to fashion something.”

“So, like a sled?” Yogiri sat down on Furemaru.

Once Enju and Tomochika had joined him, Furemaru began to slide down the side of the mountain at an incredible speed, reaching the bottom in no time at all.

“What was all that effort climbing the mountain for?” Yogiri complained.

“It would have been difficult to use for climbing. It can provide a burst of energy for a moment, but continuous propulsion is too hard.”

The city standing before them was surrounded by walls built from logs. Though not on the level of stone, they still looked rather sturdy.

“If it’s the same on the inside, I can imagine it would burn well,” Yogiri observed.

“It doesn’t seem like such a wealthy town, does it?” asked Tomochika.

“I suppose that’s the entrance? It looks like it’s been destroyed.”

The gate was made of logs as well, but it had taken serious damage. As such, it couldn’t stop anyone from entering or leaving the city.

“Are they under attack?”

“Considering the smoke, that is very possible,” Mokomoko answered. “I guess we should take a look inside.”

Passing through the gate, the three of them entered the city.

“You fool! You absolute fool!” a rather round woman was yelling at Vivian.

“Uh, well, the Yogiri Takatou Signal was—”

“I don’t know what that is, but what were you thinking, breaking the gate as you left?!”

“I mean, I couldn’t open it myself, so—”

“Are you the one who destroyed the barrier as well?!”

“Well, I’m invincible, so I thought I could ignore it—”

“The altar is in flames because the barrier was destroyed! What on earth have you done?!”

“I didn’t know this would happen...”

“Anyway, you’re not even allowed to go outside! *What have you done?!* Why now, of all times?! Idiot! Fool! You idiot!”

“I’m sorry, Miss Maanu,” Vivian said, the beginnings of tears in her eyes.

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“Looks like the fire isn’t that big,” Yogiri said. “Actually, is it already starting to go out?” It didn’t seem like the flames were spreading. The plume of smoke rising from somewhere in the city was starting to thin.

“What do we do?” Tomochika asked. “I feel like it’s hard to just call out to them...”

“Maybe, but we can’t just sit here and watch. Excuse me!” Yogiri called to the woman named Maanu, who was still scolding Vivian.

“What?! Who are you people?! Are you adventurers?!”

“No! This is Yogiri Ta—”

“You be quiet!”

“Yes, ma’am.”

When asked who he was, Yogiri wasn’t sure how to respond. According to Vivian’s story, West Ent was totally isolated. The existence of sea monsters made the explanation that they had drifted here across the sea hard to believe. It was suspicious for outsiders to have shown up at all.

“Our ship was wrecked and we washed ashore. Then we met Vivian, who guided us here. We’re not adventurers.” There was nothing he could say to trick her, so he just answered honestly.

“Find somewhere else. This city is already full.”

“Wow, what a rejection!” said Tomochika.

“If we’re not welcome, I guess there’s nothing we can do.”

They had already acquired some information from Vivian, so they would have to make do with that. If they wanted to reach the capital, they needed to head east. They knew they were on the southern side of West Ent, so if they could see the ocean, they would be able to tell which direction they were heading in. The Elven Forest seemed like a difficult place to traverse, but if their only concern was something attacking them, it should have been easy enough to manage.

“See you later, then.”

With a quick goodbye to Vivian, the three of them turned to leave the city behind. As they did, they saw four people pass through the gate. At first glance, Yogiri thought they were the adventurers that had been mentioned earlier. One man wore leather armor and had a sword at his hip. One had a hooded cloak concealing his face and body. One woman had a wide-brimmed, three-pointed hat. And the fourth woman wore loose white robes, similar to a priest’s vestments. They were likely a party consisting of a

warrior, thief, mage, and priest. It looked just like the party of adventurers one would expect to see in a video game.

"Yo, sis, what city is this?" the warrior asked Tomochika.

"Huh? I have no idea."

"What? Come on, there's no way we can start the quest like that. The people right inside the gate should be like, 'This is such-and-such village,' like it's the only line they're smart enough to remember. That's why we keep you guys alive."

"Why is everyone around here like this?!"

Yogiri felt like sighing as well. People like that, who only cared about their own situation and tried to force their values onto everyone else, and who were effectively impossible to communicate with, were a dime a dozen here.

"Hey, aren't you western people supposed to help us with these quests? If you can't give us a real reply, we'll have to report that this village has fallen to the dark powers. And then a quest will come out like, 'Destroy the base of the dark forces!'" the woman who looked like a mage said.

Maanu reluctantly stepped forward to answer her. "This is the city of Kadan."

"Emergency Quest, Eliminate the Remnants of the Royal Family! Mission 1: 'Go to the City of Kadan,' complete!" a voice suddenly called out from nowhere in particular.

"What is that about?!" Maanu cried. "This isn't what we were told to expect!"

"Unfortunately, it seems this city was doomed from the start," the mage continued. "Oh, of course, if you string up the head person from the royal family hiding around here and bring it out to us, we can finish this as smoothly as possible. The final objective of the quest is to eliminate the runaway royal, so we don't *have* to kill everyone else..."

"Emergency Quest, Eliminate the Remnants of the Royal Family! Mission 2: 'Find the Remnants of the Royal Family,' complete!"

"Huh? Looks like mission 2 just went ahead and finished itself," the warrior said.

"In that case, I suppose one of the people we can see is the person we're looking for?" the mage offered.

"One of these?" The warrior looked around. His gaze passed over Yogiri, Tomochika, Enju, Vivian, and Maanu in turn. Only the five of them were

visible. “If we’re talking about royalty, they’d have to look good, right? Looks like...she’s probably the best option? Doesn’t she look like a princess?” After thinking it over for a moment, the warrior pointed at Enju.

“Enju *is* the successor of the Sumeragi family, so I guess she is kind of like a princess.”

“However, princesses being beautiful is only true in fiction,” Mokomoko said. “With political marriages being so common, it was more likely for them to have much more frightful complexions.”

“Ahh...so that’s why Mokomoko looks that way...” Tomochika mused.

“Do you have a problem with my beautiful face?!”

“What is wrong with you?!” Vivian interrupted, shouting angrily. “How can you not recognize my noble heritage just from my visage?!”

“Why are you revealing yourself?! You fool! Idiot! Fool!” Maanu’s angry insults were rather lacking in variety.

“Uhh, what exactly is going on here?” asked Tomochika.

“So, you were being hunted yourself. Are you really in a position to be hunting me down?” Yogiri asked Vivian.

“Hm. Perhaps it would be best for us to head to the capital immediately and avoid getting involved?” Mokomoko suggested.

Vivian was apparently a member of the old royal family and was therefore being targeted by the adventurers. As the hands of the empire, they had been instructed to eliminate the remnants of the royal line.

“No, no, no, this is supposed to be a story like us saving the princess of a lost kingdom from the hands of an evil empire, right?!”

“You can say that, but you’ve seen the princess, right?” Yogiri replied. “I’m not really excited about the thought of trying to save her, although if what she said earlier is true, she doesn’t need our help anyway.”

They didn’t know how strong the adventurers were, but Vivian was proud of her invincible defenses. There should have been no need for them to worry.

Yogiri started walking towards the gate.

“Oh, you thought we would let you go?” the mage said, pointing her staff at him. “We can’t prove which among you is the royal, but it has to be one of you five.”

She must have planned on killing everyone present, but instead she promptly collapsed to the ground. Yogiri had got to her first after sensing her

killing intent.

The other three adventurers cried out in surprise. One of them being killed with no warning at all must have shocked them considerably. And in that opening, Vivian leaped into action.

“Chainsaw Shield!”

She threw a shield, which cut through the air with a terrifying roar. That loud sound wasn’t just the shield passing through the air; it was from an actual chainsaw. For some reason, countless blades had sprouted from the edge of the shield, spinning rapidly with a violent howl. It tore apart the leather armor of the warrior and punched through the magical defenses of the priest. The thief dropped to the ground, easily dodging the attack before sprinting away.

“Wait! I won’t let you— Ack!” The shield suddenly flew backwards, hitting Vivian in the face.

“Oh, right, she said it was like a boomerang, didn’t she?”

“So in the end, it’s a Boomerang Chainsaw Shield.”

“It appears she is unable to control it all that well...”

Tomochika, Yogiri, and Mokomoko commented in turn. Vivian was unhurt, but being struck in the face by her own Chainsaw Shield had left her stunned. She had crouched down, dumbfounded.

“It appears they died instantly,” Mokomoko said, looking at the fallen adventurers.

The warrior and the priest had been sliced cleanly in half, with no signs that they were still alive. They had been relaxed when they’d first arrived, so they must have had no idea that their prey was so strong. They had said it was a quest, so it had likely had some sort of difficulty indicator at the beginning that had thrown them off, Yogiri thought.

“Regardless, we’re not welcome here, so we should get a move on,” he stated, turning to the gate once more.

“Hold on.”

As they tried to leave again, Maanu called out to stop them.

“What?”

“Now that you know, we can’t let you go.”

“But one of them already ran away.”

The adventurers had said they were on a quest. They could probably assume that quite a few people knew there was a member of the royal family

living in the city.

“We know who they are, but we don’t know anything about you. We have no idea what you’ll end up doing if we let you go.”

“It’s not like we’re going to go around spreading rumors, but...fine. Could you take us somewhere a bit more calm?”

It didn’t seem like Maanu had any combat ability, so they could easily ignore her and leave. But they had originally come to the city to gather information, so if the option to remain was available to them, Yogiri decided they should do just that.

“Come to my place. You’ll be safe with me.”

Surprisingly, Maanu didn’t seem to think the three of them were bad people.

Chapter 7 — They Would Think, “This Guy Is Dangerous, I Gotta Do Something”

Tomochika and the others followed Maanu. The city of Kadan was reasonably large, but it didn’t quite compare to the cities they had seen so far. The previous ones they had visited showed clear signs of technology built on magic or borrowed from other worlds, but there was none of that here. Most of the buildings were built entirely out of wood and were one or two stories, while the roads were all unpaved.

“It seems kind of simplistic, doesn’t it?” Tomochika commented.

“I guess the places we’ve seen before were all controlled by Sages, so they looked pretty wealthy.” Yogiri replied.

The majority of Sages seemed overly proud, looking down on everyone else. They didn’t appear to care one way or the other about the people living in their territories. But it also seemed like they didn’t like the cities or countries they lived in to look pathetic either, so they put in a certain amount of effort into developing infrastructure, social welfare programs, and investing in the environment. In short, seeing none of that here clearly showed that the Sage Yoshifumi didn’t care about West Ent at all.

“Here,” Maanu said as she entered one of the houses.

The three of them followed her in, and as if it were only natural, Vivian was tagging along as well. Leading them into the living room, Maanu sat them down at a table before taking a seat opposite them. But as Vivian tried to do the same, Maanu stopped her.

“You stand.”

“Huh?”

“Stop acting like you don’t get it. I’m telling you to think about what you’ve done!”

“Yes, ma’am...” Apparently, despite being royalty, Maanu was still pretty strict with Vivian.

“Now then, who exactly are you people?”

“Who are we? Ah, okay. You know that Sages summon people from other worlds, right?” Yogiri was planning on being straightforward with her.

“‘Summon’? I’ve never heard of such a thing, but I suppose if it’s the Sages, it’s not out of the question.”

The existence of otherworlders had been apparent in every other town they had visited, but that didn’t seem to be the case here.

“We are otherworlders summoned here by a Sage. I bet the Sage Yoshifumi himself is from another world as well,” Yogiri explained.

Judging from the guy’s name, it sounded like he was Japanese. A good number of people seemed to come to this world from Japan, so it was very likely.

“Now that you mention it, you look different from people around here. I thought the Sages were just a different race. You wouldn’t happen to be in league with them, would you?”

“We’re planning on going to see him, but at this point, we don’t know anything about him but his name.”

“Why?”

“We want to return to our home world. We need an item the Sage has to do that, so we want to get it from him, no matter what.”

“Ha!” Vivian cut in. “You say you want to get it, but we all know you intend murder! I will not allow you to accomplish such a thing, Yogiri Takatou! In order to restore our nation, we, the Resistance, must defeat the Sage!”

“Vivian...you absolute fool...” Maanu said with a sigh.

Tomochika had figured something like that was the case. A resistance group was hiding in the city, and Maanu and Vivian were members.

“Uhh, not that we plan on spreading rumors or anything, but does that mean you’re planning on overthrowing the empire and reinstating Vivian as ruler?”

“It’s even showing up in quests, so there’s not much point in keeping it a secret now,” Maanu replied.

“What are these ‘quests’ we keep hearing about?” Yogiri asked.

Tomochika had also been curious about the game-like terminology.

“Did Vivian tell you what adventurers are?”

“To an extent.”

“Adventurers don’t just romp around doing whatever they please here.

The adventurer's guild in the empire gives them objectives to accomplish. That's what 'quests' are."

"Wait, if the guild is in the empire, does that mean the adventurers come from the east?"

Vivian had told them they couldn't travel between the eastern and western sides of the island, so Tomochika hadn't realized it was possible.

"That's right. They casually waltz on over whenever they want to go on an adventure, then go back as soon as they're finished. There's some magical pathway that only adventurers can use."

"Is there no way we can use it?"

"No, you need to register with the guild first. So of course, for those of us living in the west, it's useless."

"Then I guess we have no choice but to go through the Elven Forest after all."

"Did you get that idea from Vivian as well?"

"Hey! I never told them about the fact that the elves seem to be weakened right now, so now is our best chance to get through!" Vivian burst out, as if insulted.

"Vivian, could you be quiet, please?" Maanu sounded exhausted.

"We're learning a lot from her," Tomochika commented.

"Letting her come in was probably a mistake for Maanu," Yogiri agreed.

"Well, that's the situation. We're planning on heading to the Elven Forest tomorrow. As long as you aren't planning on getting in our way, we won't bother you."

"What do you mean by 'weakened'?"

"I guess you could tell just by looking around, so there's no point in hiding it. Two days ago, something strange happened."

She continued to explain that people all over town had suddenly collapsed. They had been totally healthy but had just fallen over dead. The victims didn't seem to have anything in common either. The people of the city had feared it was a mysterious disease of some sort, but there had been no casualties after that initial wave. All the victims simply passed away at exactly the same moment.

Furthermore, the phenomenon wasn't limited to the people of the city. Livestock and pets were also found dead. And when they looked into it, the same thing had happened outside of the city as well. Wild animals and even

plants had met the same fate. The reason was unclear, but all kinds of living things had abruptly died simultaneously.

"So you think the elves might have died in the same way?" Tomochika asked.

"Yes. It was just a hunch at first, but some people went to check, and after heading a little ways into the forest, the elves didn't attack. We don't know how widespread the phenomenon was, but it looks to have affected them as well. At any rate, now that we've been found out, we have no choice but to try making it through the forest."

"That means the Elven Forest should be easier to pass through... Hey, is something wrong, Takatou?"

Yogiri had a bitter expression on his face. "I was just thinking," he whispered back, "those deaths were probably all my fault."

"What do you mean?"

"Remember that Izelda guy on the boat?"

"Oh yeah, the guy who said everyone was him?" Tomochika recalled the events on the cruise ship. Izelda was the guy who had appeared as a crowd of people, gloating about something or other.

"Yeah, somehow all of them seemed to be Izelda. And not just there, they were spread all over the world."

"What?"

"I don't know how he did it, but he must have multiplied himself and spread out."

"And all of them died?!"

"With someone like that, you have to kill every branch or they just come back. It's all or nothing."

"I see. I'm not blaming you or anything, but if a god was watching, I can see why they would think, 'This guy is dangerous, I gotta do something.'"

Even if it was in self-defense, that was just crazy. But that's what it meant to be protected by Yogiri. The larger the enemy, the larger the effect of his response.

"I guess that's all we have to talk about," Maanu said.

"What do you plan on doing with us?" Tomochika asked.

"Nothing in particular. It would be a problem if you were with the empire, but that doesn't seem to be the case."

"We're going to head to the forest."

“Do as you like. We can’t do anything to stop you. But on a selfish note, we’d be grateful if you waited until after tomorrow. If that’s okay, you can stay here until then.”

“What do you think?” Tomochika asked Yogiri.

“Well, it’s not like we’re in a huge rush or anything.”

They both wanted to return home as fast as possible, but they had been traveling at a pretty relaxed pace so far. It wasn’t like every minute counted.

“I guess we’ll take you up on your offer.”

“See you later, then,” Maanu said, tossing them a key. “I have a lot of work to do to get ready.” She stepped out of the room.

“Are you not going with her, Vivian?”

“It seemed like she was saying, ‘You’re in the way, don’t bother’ to me...”

“Isn’t leaving Vivian behind a huge liability, though?” Tomochika mused.

“I don’t know; it seemed like they had nothing left to be concerned about leaking at this point,” Mokomoko replied.

“All right, then. I’m getting kind of hungry,” Yogiri said, changing the subject. “I guess we should eat something.” They hadn’t eaten since they had been riding on Kouryu’s back, so it had been a fairly long time.

“Didn’t they say something about being short on food?”

“I can’t imagine a city like this having *nowhere* to eat.”

“Allow me to guide you!”

Although they hadn’t been talking to her, Vivian butted in once again.

“Why should we?”

“I cannot allow a villain like Yogiri Takatou to wander the city unchecked!”

“Hey, are you really planning on killing me?”

“Of course! I received this mission from God!”

“If you’re serious, then let me warn you. You shouldn’t be so friendly with someone you may end up killing. It’ll be hard for you later.”

“Ha! Like it would ever be hard for me to kill you!”

It didn’t seem like she had taken his warning seriously.

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With Vivian’s guidance, their group soon made it to a pub. It appeared to be one managed by adventurers, so regardless of the food situation in town,

as long as they had money, they could get whatever they wanted. Sitting down at a table, they ordered some random items and waited. In spite of being in a pub, they didn't order any alcohol.

"We're in a different world, I don't think we need to worry about Japanese laws," Tomochika noted.

"Asaka said it would be better if I didn't drink." Yogiri's adoptive mother had warned him against drinking numerous times, perhaps in light of her own poor experiences. "But if you want something, feel free."

"No, we don't drink in our family either."

"Indeed," Mokomoko added. "Consumption of alcohol leads to an inevitable drop in performance. For a tradition that proclaims the need to treat every situation as a battlefield, partaking in alcohol would be irresponsible."

There wasn't enough time in the day to list all the famous swordsmen or martial artists who had been attacked and killed while they were drunk.

"There are a lot of folktales about people being killed after someone got them drunk, now that you mention it."

"I thought if I got you drunk, you'd go on a rampage, and then I could strike you down in retaliation..." Vivian murmured.

They had thought she was just going to show them a place to eat, but now she was sitting with them.

"There's also that," Yogiri said. "If I got drunk and lost track of what I was doing, who knows what would happen?"

"Even thinking about you going on a rampage is terrifying." Tomochika shuddered.

"Anyway, can you tell us more about the Elven Forest?" Yogiri asked Vivian.

"Wh-What about it?"

"I get that you have to go through it to get to the east, but there's no point in just going there. If your enemy *is* the empire, that means you're fighting a Sage. There's no way you can defeat him without a proper plan, right?"

"Heh heh heh! I am perfectly capable of defeating the Sage myself, don't you think?"

"But that was only since this morning, right? From our conversation earlier, it sounded like there were plans in place since well before that."

"I-I don't know anything about them! And if I say anything else, Miss Maanu will get mad at me again!" Vivian all but confessed they had some

sort of plan.

“I just thought I’d ask, but I guess there’s no point.” As far as Yogiri was concerned, it didn’t matter what Vivian and the rest of the Resistance did.

“Then why did you ask?! You truly must be a villain!”

“Only out of curiosity. So again, out of curiosity, why did you protect me? Wouldn’t it have been more convenient for you if those bandits had killed me?” Yogiri repeated the question she hadn’t given a proper answer to before.

“Well—”

“If you’re killed by some random bandits, then we all lose our powers,” a voice called out from the table next to them. “We’ve all been blessed with the powers of apostles. It would be inconvenient to suddenly lose them.”

Looking over, they saw a boy with an eye patch, staring back at them with a condescending air.

“If Yogiri Takatou dies, the powers of the apostles disappear,” he continued. “But the reward for being the one to kill him is getting to keep your powers. As such...” He pulled a sword out from empty space as he stared at Vivian. “I’m going to have to ask you to die.”

“That’s a lot cooler than making shields,” Yogiri observed, thoroughly impressed. Although it had a very affected air, the boy had practiced that sword-drawing technique enough to make it look good.

“Sh-Shields are cool too!” Vivian materialized a shield in response.

“Making it appear instantly is all well and good, but if you don’t take your time, it doesn’t look as good for the performance,” Yogiri replied.

“Is this really the time to be judging performance?!” Tomochika cried.

“Why are they ignoring me to fight each other, though?” Yogiri was truly confused by the sight before them.

Chapter 8 — Obviously, the System Lacks Any Serious Testing

The boy's sword, with its single blade and distinctive curve, looked like a Japanese weapon.

"You know all about swords, right, Mokomoko?" Tomochika asked. "Do you know that one's name? Like something-maru or something-masamune?"

"While I am quite accustomed to utilizing swords, I am not so well-versed in their inscriptions. Hm. There is no doubt that it is of Japanese origin, though!"

"And here I thought your knowledge of the Heian era would finally be useful! What kind of ancestor are you?!"

"Our school is one of archery! We have no fascination with katanas! As long as it can cut, it's useful, no? All it is is a knife for killing people!"

"Speaking of which, what about Vivian's shields?"

"They are round shields, I suppose? But like I said, we are a school of archery!"

As it was the middle of the day, there were few customers in the pub. They didn't seem to be paying much attention to the boy, but if fighting was to break out, they would inevitably draw attention to themselves.

"Uh, I have a suggestion," Tomochika offered. "Why don't you guys fight somewhere there are no other people?"

"Why should I care?" the boy spat, standing from his seat. He didn't seem to mind being watched by others, so there wasn't much hope of him listening.

"I guess there's no choice. We'll have to evacuate the other customers. Dannoura, could you scream?"

"Me? I guess. *Oh no! A dangerous guy swinging a sword around has appeared! Everyone, run away!*" Tomochika shouted, obviously acting.

Everyone inside immediately turned to look. The pub served normal citizens, not adventurers, so it was only natural that upon seeing the boy with his blade drawn, they began to flee the scene.

“Oh? And here I thought you were a villain responsible for a huge massacre,” the boy said.

“You shouldn’t believe what people tell you so easily.”

Tomochika snorted. “You’re really going to pretend you didn’t do anything, huh?”

“What is with you?!” Vivian protested, standing up with her twin shields in hand. “What point is there to apostles like us fighting amongst ourselves?!”

“The point? If you kill another apostle, you get their powers. So why not kill each other?”

“No way! I’ve never heard of such a thing! What? It was added on request? And you figured you’d tell me *eventually*?!” Vivian shouted at the sky.

It looked like she had received another message from her god. At any rate, it was a problem for the two of them to solve on their own, so Yogiri, Tomochika, and Mokomoko stood up and gave them some space.

“But, like, if they’re giving powers to these apostles so that they can kill me, why let them steal each other’s powers by killing each other? Now they’re just going to fight without paying any attention to me.”

“Based on what we heard from Vivian, this god seems pretty irresponsible...”

Vivian faced off against the boy. He seemed totally relaxed. She hesitated at first, but remembering how invincible she was, her attitude quickly changed, a daring smile rising to her face.

“Shall we see what you’ve got, then?” she challenged him.

“What do you think about this fight, Mokomoko?” Yogiri asked.

“Hm. They are both obvious amateurs. They don’t even have a solid sense of balance. The boy doesn’t look like he knows how to use a sword, and Vivian’s style of using shields is totally haphazard.”

“The guy with the sword will probably strike first, right? Vivian said she only wants to focus on defense.”

“But she killed those adventurers rather proactively, did she not?”

“That’s just because they found out she was a member of the royal family from that quest.”

“At any rate, if Vivian is confident in her defense, she need only wait and watch. However, that being the correct choice or not is dependent on the

abilities of the swordsman. If he is also an apostle, he must have some sort of unique ability."

"You two really switch into spectator mode easily, don't you?!" Tomochika interjected.

As Yogiri had predicted, the boy was the first to make a move. He stepped forward, casually holding his sword low.

"Spike Shield!" As Vivian shouted, an enormous spike sprang from the center of her shield towards her opponent.

"She can do basically anything, can't she?!"

The boy swung his sword in turn. Cutting through the spike, it went flying off into the center of the pub. Evacuating the other customers had been the right choice.

"Having a spike in the center of your shield is common enough, though," Mokomoko commented. "More importantly, how did he cut it so easily? Was she not supposed to be able to reflect any attack?"

"Maybe that doesn't extend to the spike part," Yogiri suggested.

"I'm a little surprised, but so what?" the boy taunted Vivian. "I'm not even sure if there's a point in taking a power like that." The boy stopped, evaluating Vivian's powers.

"Ha! Who cares about the ability to make a sword that can cut well? My invincible shield can stop any attack!"

"Oh? Interesting. My sword can cut anything. Why don't we try testing it out?" the boy said, resting his weapon on his shoulder.

"Bring it on! I will gladly counter your attack!"

The boy leaped forward. In an instant, he closed the gap between them, slashing diagonally down towards her. As if she had predicted the attack, Vivian raised her shield to block it.

Yogiri swallowed, earnestly watching for the result. A clunking sound filled the room as the now split halves of Vivian's shield struck the floor.

"What?" she blurted before her body slid apart as well. The blade had sliced through her shield and cut her in half, from the left shoulder diagonally down to her flank. Her upper body fell to the floor, spilling blood and guts everywhere.

"I guess that's what happens when you put a paradox to the test," Yogiri said.

"If two powers contradict each other, the winner would be decided at the

discretion of the god who gave those powers, I suppose."

"Is this really the time to be talking about that?! This is a disaster!" Tomochika shouted at them.

The boy tossed his blood-soaked blade into the air, where it instantly vanished. "Looks like I win. So... Oh, it works." He created a shield in his empty hand. He had indeed gained Vivian's powers. "I guess the question is, when do I want to actually kill Yogiri Takatou?"

He was totally full of himself after having defeated Vivian and was now debating using Yogiri as bait to lure in other apostles.

"I mean, I guess he isn't planning on hurting me directly, but I don't know if I like the thought of him using me like that..."

It would be a pain if this kept happening. Even if the boy wasn't planning on directly harming Yogiri, it might have been best to put him down right then and there. But as Yogiri thought that, it became clear that the contest with Vivian wasn't over yet.

"You thought I was dead?!" Despite having been sliced in half, Vivian stood up. She was now back to normal, and while her clothes being cut apart gave her a somewhat immodest appearance, her skin wasn't so much as scratched. Even the blood and guts that had spilled all over the floor had disappeared.

"What? Oh, I see. Now that I have your ability, I understand. You come back to life even when you die."

"Precisely! I thought it was meaningless with my invincible defenses, but on the off chance I am slain, I will return to life! This is the power of Advanced Shield Resurrection!"

Despite having already died once, Vivian didn't seem to be the least bit discouraged. Materializing her shields once again, she was ready to continue the fight.

"Yep, gotta stick that 'shield' word in wherever we can..." Tomochika muttered.

"Hm. This has become a rather bizarre situation. So, they do truly steal the powers of apostles that they kill..." Mokomoko mused.

"Seems like it," Yogiri answered. "After he killed her, he gained her ability to create shields. But then Vivian came back to life."

"Is it like a bug in the rules or something? Obviously, the system lacks any serious testing."

Vivian said her defenses were invincible, but as they just witnessed, there were still some ways to beat her. And if another apostle killed her, they would also gain that power of resurrection. So what would happen if that immortal person continued to participate in the battle? The number of people with immortality would continue to grow. Even if Vivian were to now kill the boy, she would gain his ability to create swords, and then the boy would come back to life. There would be no end to it.

Yogiri was starting to doubt whether the system was really made to kill him anymore.

"Ugh! What a pain!" the boy with the sword cried.

"So? Have you realized that you can't defeat me, no matter what?"

"Yeah, as annoying as it is. I understand your powers now. Even if my sword can cut through your shield, you'll just come back to life every time."

"Then you have no choice but to flee in disgrace!"

"No. All it means is that I have to go back to my initial objective."

The boy jumped back, opening a gap between him and Vivian. She began to panic, realizing what he intended.

"I just need to kill Yogiri Takatou. If I do that, I'll be the only immortal one, and I'll have the power of the strongest sword!" He turned to face Yogiri.

"I figured we'd end up here," Yogiri sighed.

If the boy left to collect more powers and ended up spreading this immortality ability even further, he would quickly lose control of the situation. As such, he was better off killing Yogiri right away so that he was the only one who would have those powers. If he put aside his greed, that would be the obvious conclusion anyway.

"I guess I can kill you without worrying about it, then." Yogiri unleashed his power. As the boy made to jump forward, he fell to the ground, motionless. They waited and watched for a while, but he didn't stand up like Vivian had. He was truly dead.

"So, looks like the people you kill really die for good, huh?" Tomochika said.

"It's pretty obvious that dead people don't come back to life. I thought that was common sense."

Death was irreversible. Coming back to life was impossible in the first place. Anyone that appeared to have come back to life must not have been

truly dead in the first place. That's what death meant to Yogiri. Nothing that contradicted this common sense could occur within his realm of perception. If someone or something was killed by someone else, there was a chance they were still alive, but if they were killed by Yogiri, they were absolutely, undeniably dead. There was no way they could come back to life.

"Huh? What is going on?" Vivian gaped at them. She must have been expecting some sort of brutal contest. In fact, if the boy hadn't targeted Yogiri, her fight with the boy could have gone on forever.

"Didn't your god tell you? My ability is to kill anyone just by thinking it."

"Th-There's no way you could have such an absurd ability!"

"Yeah, you would think..." Tomochika shrugged.

"Oh, another message from God! The person with the ability to cut anything and to make swords appear from nowhere was defeated by Yogiri Takatou," Vivian said, staring up into the sky again as she heard a message coming from somewhere. "I see. They are sharing who failed to kill you so that the others might use that information to take precautions in their own fights."

"I feel like I also beat the shield power, though."

"Hm. But only the kid with the sword died. Maybe that's all they were counting."

"You get it now, right?" Yogiri asked, turning to Vivian. "Your invincibility can't stand up to my power."

"E-Even so! That does not change that I have to protect you!"

"Why?" Yogiri asked, exasperated.

"Because if you are killed, I will lose my own power! And we need this power to take back our kingdom!"

Perhaps she was just a good person at her core, but without seeing Yogiri do anything wrong, Vivian didn't even think of trying to kill him.

"I'd rather you just left us alone. I have no plan to die."

The apostles could tell where Yogiri was. Fighting them may have been unavoidable, but he certainly had no intention of losing to them.

"But at this rate, staying here might be dangerous to the city itself," he continued. "We were asked to spend the night, but maybe we should move on."

"Yeah, I get the feeling we're going to be seeing a lot of people like that in the near future," Tomochika agreed.

Chapter 9 — I Might Die If I Get Caught in the Door!

Jan, who held the role of thief in the orthodox adventurers' party, was running through the mountains. He was still fleeing the city of Kadan.

His ability to dodge the roaring shield that had been thrown at them was mostly a fluke. He had only been able to react fast enough because he had happened to be standing behind the two who had been killed, and even then, he had only dropped to the ground in a panic without any thought for where the shield was going. If it had been thrown vertically, it would have split his head in two.

"Dammit! The difficulty rating was only three! Why was there an enemy like that?!" The difficulty rating for quests wasn't absolute, but it did serve as an effective guide. An orthodox party should have been able to handle anything up to a difficulty of level five. Even if the difficulty rating wasn't supposed to be perfectly accurate, if they could get killed in a single hit right after the mission started, it didn't seem to be useful at all.

"Should we have planned more thoroughly, since it was an emergency quest?" Emergency quests were those that appeared suddenly with no previous warning. In this case, the hiding royal had been discovered, so they must have wanted her dealt with immediately. The quest was made up of multiple missions, but perhaps due to its nature as an emergency quest, the details were pretty simple.

Emergency Quest: Eliminate the Remnants of the Royal Family!
Mission 1: "Go to the city of Kadan!"
Mission 2: "Find the Remnants of the Royal Family!"
Mission 3: "Eliminate the Remnants of the Royal Family!"

Normally, quests had many more missions and far more detailed, clear conditions.

“Maybe because it was an emergency quest it wasn’t properly scouted out? Dammit, what am I supposed to do even if I make it back?!”

Even if he survived, he wasn’t sure he could continue his life as an adventurer. Jan only worked as one because he’d been with his childhood friends. He didn’t think he could get into another party very easily.

“Anyway, I can worry about that once I’m home!”

Being alone in the west was bad. Jan ran through the empty wasteland, diving into one of the rocky mountains.

The mountain was an illusion. Once inside, it disappeared, revealing a hole that led underground. He descended the ladder that was set up there. Only adventurers could use the portals, but having their locations known would still be bad, so the portals were hidden as much as possible.

Passing through the underground cave, he made it to a wider cavern. Inside was a set of stone ruins containing the teleportation portal.

“What—?!”

Jan froze in front of the ruins. The light spilling from them illuminated a ghastly scene. Everything was covered in blood, with numerous dismembered bodies lying around. The bodies, scattered about carelessly, were damaged so thoroughly, it was clear they couldn’t be alive.

It appeared all of the victims were adventurers. There was a warrior, a mage, a priest, a thief, a paladin, a minstrel, an alchemist, and a necromancer. Each type of adventurer had characteristic gear, so they could be identified at a glance.

“What happened here? Was there some monster lying in wait for them?”

But looking closer, it appeared the wounds on the bodies had all come from blades. At the very least, something intelligent enough to use a weapon had done this.

Jan hesitated. Should he look for another portal to use or try to rush inside and use the one in front of him as fast as possible? While he stood there indecisively, one of those options was taken away from him as someone appeared from inside the ruins.

“What... What did you do?”

The woman who had appeared held a sword covered in blood. It wasn’t much of a stretch to assume she had been the one to cut down the adventurers. He needed to run away. There was a possibility that she wasn’t the culprit, but if he didn’t act like she was, he wouldn’t have a chance to

regret it later.

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Still, he had to ask. The woman had a unique role—that of hero. The hero Kris. Every adventurer knew that name. She was a master adventurer, admired by all.

If this was really Kris, then even if all of the adventurers around her had fought her at once, it was unsurprising that they had been killed. But he had no idea why a hero would do something like this. He couldn't help but feel like she must have had a reason for it.

"I received a revelation from God," Kris said casually.

"God told you to do *this*?!"

If that was the case, it couldn't have been any proper god. Perhaps one of the Dark Gods, or even an Evil God was responsible.

"No, I was told to kill the enemy of humanity, the boy Yogiri Takatou."

"W-Was he here?"

An enemy of humanity. If that was true, it made sense for a hero to be involved. Their battle would have been fierce, and it made sense that a number of adventurers would have been caught in the crossfire.

"No, he wasn't."

"Then..."

"I was given the power to take the abilities of others by slashing them, so I thought I'd try it out."

"What?"

"I decided to start with the people that came with me. When I did, I realized I obtained something that had been inside each of them. I thought it was interesting, so I just continued testing it and eventually, it ended up like this."

"You're...a hero, right? Aren't you strong enough without taking other people's powers?!"

"Oh, I did get stronger by training, but not because I liked training itself. If there was an easier way, anyone would choose that, wouldn't they?" Kris asked, as if it were obvious.

Like she said, if one found an easier way to obtain the same result, it was more efficient to take that path. But if that easier path meant killing your own companions, Jan could only have written it off as impossible.

"But did you have to go this far?"

The adventurers had expressions of intense suffering on their faces. With her abilities, she should have been able to easily kill them in a single stroke,

but they had all been meticulously sliced apart.

“Oh, yes! The secret is to cut them without killing them! I gain their powers when I cut them, but the power I get is random. So if they’re still alive, I can just keep trying over and over! At first, I didn’t really get that, so I just cut them down immediately.” Kris acted as if she were relaying a great discovery.

“I-I see. Well, I was just about to head back to the east.”

Jan couldn’t spend any more time with this crazy woman. He just wanted to get out of there.

“Oh, okay. Then by all means.”

Kris stepped out of his way. He had expected her to kill him too, so he felt immediately relieved when he saw that. Thinking about it, killing someone like Jan would have offered no benefit to someone as powerful as her.

Jan stepped into the ruins. The magic circle was just inside. The moment someone recorded as an adventurer stepped into it, they would be transported back to the capital. Although he was bewildered by the recent events, he could think about what to do once he made it back to the capital and calmed down.

He tried to take another step forward, but his foot never reached the ground. Losing his balance, he fell over. An intense pain ran through his leg. Looking down in shock, he saw that everything below his ankle was missing. Kris was looking down at him.

“Why...”

Kris had acted like Jan wasn’t the least bit interesting to her. He had thought she was letting him go.

“Killing someone who has turned around and let their guard down is a lot easier.”

“E-Even if you kill someone like me...”

“Don’t worry. I’ve got the hang of it now, so you won’t die right away.” Pain ran through his hand. His little finger was now missing. “Oh, I only got stamina that time. I guess that’s a miss. Please give me a skill or something.”

Hell had begun.

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Loud music and bright lights filled the room in Ent’s imperial palace. The

thick smoke and smell of alcohol saturating the air made this the place Yoshifumi was most fond of. If one was looking for him, this was the first place they would look.

Of course, the one looking for him was not Hanakawa, but a girl named Luna. Hanakawa had only come here because he was following her.

Is this some sort of nightclub? An otaku of such high moral fiber as myself has never visited one, of course.

Round tables surrounded by stools were populated by scantily clad women drinking alcohol. Yoshifumi himself was sitting at the bar, leaning back with his legs outstretched and watching the women dance.

"Yoshifumi! Do something about this guy!" Luna said, jumping into the Sage's arms and pointing at Hanakawa.

"Have I done something to bother you?" Hanakawa was wearing his jester's outfit. Given to him by Yoshifumi, it alone was what guaranteed his safety within the palace.

"Huh? What's with you all of a sudden?" Yoshifumi complained. Normally, someone acting like that would have been killed in an instant, but as Luna was one of his Four Heavenly Kings, he allowed the familiar behavior she had just displayed.

"This guy is so disgusting! I can erase him, right?!"

"What? Are you trying to disregard my decision?"

Yoshifumi grew angry, and Luna immediately looked terrified. She realized at once she shouldn't press the issue further.

"This guy is my jester. I already decided that. My word is absolute here. You know that, right?"

"R-Right, of course. I'm sorry, please forgive me." Luna must have thought that Yoshifumi would do away with someone like Hanakawa in an instant if asked, but she hadn't realized how important he considered Hanakawa's role.

"Of course, the only thing he's allowed to do is speak. If he breaks that rule, you can do whatever you like to him... So?"

"I haven't so much as laid a finger on her!"

"Of course not! If you had, I would have erased you in an instant!"

"Erase" wasn't a metaphor in this case. Luna's ability was to create the city around them, and part of that allowed her to erase things so that she could rebuild them. She could erase any part of the city she wished, and

anyone inside it would be removed along with it.

"I was just enjoying her scent."

"He's so disgusting!"

"I am allowed to step closer and sniff, am I not?! It is your own fault for giving off such a scent in the first place. If you do not wish me to smell it, then simply cease giving off such a pleasing odor!"

"This guy came into my room!"

"Why didn't you just lock the door?" Yoshifumi asked, exasperated.

"No, you don't get it! He was staying super close behind me, and then said, 'Oh, if you close the door on me, that counts as attacking me, you know. Do you think he'll allow that?' In that gross way of talking he has!"

Hanakawa was allowed to say whatever he wanted inside the palace. He could never be punished. That's what Yoshifumi had promised. As long as he continued his work as court jester, his safety within the capital was guaranteed. In short, no one could attack him.

"I wonder about that. If I were caught in the door, I might die!"

"No you wouldn't... But still, rules are rules."

"Wahoo! I have received permission! Ah, allow me to clarify some further issues. Locking me away somewhere counts as an attack against me, correct?"

"I guess so. I guaranteed your freedom. I won't forgive someone who gets in the way of that."

"So in short, I am permitted to move about and speak freely, is that correct?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"And hurting anyone within the palace, breaking something important, or stealing anything is against the rules, yes?"

"Of course. You're supposed to be harmless."

"But some would consider even opening and closing doors to generate some form of loss. I will not be chastised for such a thing, correct?"

"Come on, use some common sense."

"As such, if I were to fish through Miss Luna's underwear drawer, there would be no problems, then?"

"How do you figure that?!" Luna interjected.

"Entering Miss Luna's room and opening and closing her dresser inflicts harm on no one! Even if I take her underwear in hand to enjoy its delicate

construction, as long as I return them to where I found them, it is as if nothing happened, right?! There should be no cause for complaint!"

"Stop it! Your finger fat will get all over them!"

"What?! Do you really believe that such a thing counts as being within the realm of common sense? Regardless, I would be more than willing to launder them for you afterwards. And if I'm going to go through the trouble, there should be no issue if they are soiled further before being cleaned, correct? Such as if I were to rub them on my face, or lick them, or wrap them around myself!"

"I want to kill him... I want to kill him so bad..." Luna was shaking. Even Hanakawa could feel her overflowing desire for murder. But no matter how much she hated him, there was nothing she could do.

"Well, that's how it is," Yoshifumi said. "Stop complaining about him to me all the time, okay? And make sure you tell the others. I won't accept 'I didn't know' as an excuse."

"Okay...understood." Luna managed to squeeze out.

"But my, what a dazzling room this is," Hanakawa said, changing the subject, seeing as the conversation had reached its conclusion. "Was this constructed by magic?"

"What? No, it's electricity."

"Is that so? I was unaware there was such a thing in this world."

"As long as you have magnets, you can make electricity work. Come on, I'll show you."

Yoshifumi stood up, leaving the room. Hanakawa decided to follow him for now. He could likely decline the invitation without punishment, but he was curious about what Yoshifumi would show him.

Heading down the hallway, they stepped into an elevator. It also seemed to be running on electricity. The elevator brought them underground, where they stepped out into a dimly lit space. Hanakawa couldn't see that far, but it appeared to be fairly large. The air was warm and humid and filled with the sound of machinery. Once his eyes had adjusted, he saw a number of people pushing something.

"Uhh...these are perhaps..."

"Turbines. I saw something like this in a manga once."

An enormous cylinder sat in the middle of the room, with numerous poles sticking out of it. People were using those poles to push and rotate the

cylinder. A number of turbines were set up across the room, all being spun in a similar manner.

"You mean *The Legend of the Savior From the Turn of the Century*?! Oh, well, I also have read that manga, but I thought such a thing would be totally impossible."

"Ever since I became emperor, I thought I really needed to do something emperor-like. So this is what I thought of. Pretty emperor-like, don't you think?"

"So, in the west, those mohawked men appointed to be ruffians are..."

"Oh yeah, that was an old idea I had."

"As I thought!"

"And if you try to pull anything, this is where you'll end up. Actually, would it be more interesting to give you a mohawk and send you to the west?"

"Ah, ha ha ha... I shall take your warning to heart..."

Hanakawa's present circumstances all rested on Yoshifumi's mood. Something that had begun as a whim of his could end just as easily, so there was no guarantee he would remain safe for long.

Hanakawa began to think it was necessary to come up with an escape plan.

Chapter 10 — Heh Heh Heh... He Was the Weakest of the Four Heavenly Kings

Yoshifumi sat lazily on the throne in his extravagant audience chamber. As usual, he wore leather pants and a studded leather jacket that seemed totally unfitting for an emperor, while his subordinates bowed to him on the level below.

They were in the middle of their regular meeting. For the most part, Yoshifumi left the management of the country to the bureaucrats. Normally he was satisfied to limit himself to handing down imperial edicts when he came up with new ideas, but some things were important enough to demand his attention, so they had gathered for a briefing.

“Where’s Ranj?” asked Yoshifumi. “He’s got some balls to skip out on a meeting I ordered. Does he want to die or something?”

Being absent from these meetings wasn’t permitted without a very good reason. If someone had such a reason, they needed to request a leave of absence beforehand. For the officials who knew full well how scary the Sage could be, an unexcused absence was unthinkable.

“My apologies,” one of his subordinates replied. “When he failed to arrive for a previous meeting, we sent someone to his dwelling to check on him...and found that he had passed away shortly before...”

“Huh?” Yoshifumi blurted out at the unexpected response. Even if he threatened to kill him, Ranj already being dead was well outside of his expectations.

“There seemed to be no external injuries. He was found deceased atop his bed. It appears he passed away in his sleep.”

“Who is Ranj?” Hanakawa, dressed in his clown outfit, asked from where he stood beside the throne. He had been called there to act as court jester. Having grown used to his position, he spoke without hesitation despite Yoshifumi’s position as Sage and emperor.

“Oh, he was one of the Four Heavenly Kings.”

“The Four Heavenly Kings are Miss Luna, Miss Rena, Miss Abby, and...ah, now that you mention it, one was missing.”

“You never thought to ask who the fourth one was before?”

“I feel like I asked about it once... Ah! When I heard they were male, I lost all interest immediately! But now it is time for that timeless declaration, correct? ‘Heh heh heh... He was the weakest of the Four Heavenly Kings. He is a shame on all demonkind, dying in his sleep like that!’”

“Not that we’re demons. Also, I recruited him in the first place because he was pretty strong.”

“Sages like you are so beyond the norm, I have no idea what ‘pretty strong’ means when it comes from you.”

“He split the island in half with one swing of his sword. Oh, I guess it wasn’t quite in half. The Elven Forest was protected by some strange power.”

Yoshifumi must have been talking about the splitting of East and West Ent. The island was long and thin but still had a width of about three hundred kilometers. Hanakawa hadn’t even considered that the seemingly bottomless crevice dividing the two halves of the island had been created by a person, let alone with a sword.

“It seems rather incredible that he died, then! Isn’t this quite bad?”

“It’s kind of a pain, but it’s lame to call them the Four Heavenly Kings when there are only three of them. We’ll have to find another.”

“Actually,” one of Yoshifumi’s aides interrupted, “there is something we need to report in relation to Ranj’s death.”

“Speak.”

“Similar deaths have been reported all over the capital. We have reports of approximately five hundred victims. They all seem to have passed away at roughly the same time. It is suspected that Ranj died during the same time period. While there were aged and sick among the victims, the ordinary number of deaths in the capital in one day is about twenty, so the numbers are surprising.”

“So what, is there some kind of disease? Do we need to make Luna purge it?”

“No. The victims had no apparent connection to each other, nor were they in similar locations or of similar age. Furthermore, it doesn’t appear that the damage is spreading.”

“Huh. Okay, look into it.”

“Understood!”

With that, the conversation was over. Yoshifumi seemed surprised that one of the Four Heavenly Kings was dead, but that was about it.

“Can we move on?” A woman raised her hand. She was one of the women who had accompanied Yoshifumi to the bar in the adventurer’s guild; one of the Four Heavenly Kings. Although back then she had been dressed to match Yoshifumi, she now wore a decorated dress.

“What is it, Abby?”

“My observation network found another member of the royal family.”

“Oh? That’s kind of sudden. They must have been hiding fairly well. I thought they were getting ready to make a sudden attack or something.” When Yoshifumi had taken over the country, he had spared the previous royal family. It would have been easy for a Sage to wipe them out, but he had left some sparks alive.

“A quest was created to wipe out the remnants of the royal family, but the adventurers who took it haven’t returned. It was just one party, and it seems they managed to make it to the city where the royal was hiding and found them, but that was it.”

Even though he had let them go, Yoshifumi had no intention of letting them live easily, as he had given explicit instructions to kill the members of the previous royal family wherever they were found.

“So the adventurers were killed, huh?” Yoshifumi mused. “That’s impressive. Maybe the royal gained some sort of power?”

“I don’t know that much. I set the difficulty of the Emergency Quest at three, but would it be okay to increase the difficulty and reward?”

“I’ll leave it to you. Do whatever you like. Also, did your observation network not notice anything about Ranj’s death?”

“If he died peacefully in his sleep, then no, they wouldn’t have noticed anything.” Abby’s observation network covered the entire country, but it wasn’t omniscient. Like a literal net, it had holes in it. The holes making up the net were fairly large, so they couldn’t catch many of the finer details.

“So he didn’t die fighting anything.”

“M-May I go on?” Another subordinate raised a hand. His voice was shaky, working together with the rest of his demeanor to give a totally unreliable impression.

“What is it, Akira?”

“Hm? By that name and face, is he perhaps of Japanese descent?” Hanakawa asked. It was his first time seeing the man. It was possible they had met before, but Akira kept a very low profile, so it wouldn’t be surprising if Hanakawa had simply forgotten him.

“Yeah, he came here at the same time as me. He survived all sorts of stuff and ended up becoming a Sage’s attendant.”

Yoshifumi had been transported to this world by the Sages as part of a group, just like Hanakawa had. This method of selecting Sages had been going on for a while. In all the examples up until now, only one person from each group had ever managed to become a Sage, so the others were given the title of Sage’s attendant and awarded a measure of authority.

“Umm...our Skyguard Net caught something, so your envoys were dispatched to deal with it, but...”

“Oh, Sage news. Leave that ’til later.” This was a meeting for discussing things about the empire, so it wasn’t the place for issues related to the Sages.

The meeting continued for a while, but none of the other topics were of particular interest to Hanakawa.

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Hanakawa was told he would be killed if he left the capital. As such, one might think he was safe as long as he stayed in the city, but that wasn’t quite the case. The residents of the palace knew about his role as jester, but outside the palace, that information wasn’t so widespread. His clown outfit was marked with the symbol of the emperor, so it was clear he was related to the Sage in some way. As such, ordinary citizens would no doubt avoid causing him any harm, but it was hard to expect outlaws to take that into consideration.

A safety first attitude would say it was best to stay within the palace, but living there was surprisingly boring. Though he probably should have been satisfied with a life where his safety was guaranteed and his every need was provided for, humans had a tendency to get tired of safety and luxury rather quickly.

“I haven’t seen Miss Luna or the others around either,” he muttered.

Rooms had been provided in the palace for the leaders of the empire, but perhaps due to Hanakawa’s behavior, the female leaders like Luna had all left

for somewhere else. They showed up for meetings, but once they were done, they left immediately. They were doing everything in their power to avoid Hanakawa.

“As followers of Yoshifumi, my initial impression of them was awful, but they actually seem rather high-quality!”

When they had been with Yoshifumi at the pub, they had dressed to match him, looking unhealthy and degenerate. But when Yoshifumi wasn’t around, they wore clothes that matched their own tastes.

“The maids seeming entirely unbothered by me is somewhat boring, though...”

Having an affair with one’s female servants was almost a matter of course. The maids of the palace didn’t show a single shred of displeasure towards him either. That being said, if he tried anything, he would lose his position as jester. That role was his only lifeline; he couldn’t afford to let it go. As such, there was nothing for him to do in the palace, so he left to wander the capital.

“I suppose so much has happened since my arrival here that I haven’t had a chance to see much of the city.”

The buildings and roads were constructed from stone. The city was lively and energetic, so Yoshifumi’s rule may not have been all that bad.

“However, there is still the possibility of it all suddenly being erased.”

No matter how peaceful things appeared, Yoshifumi’s potential threat to the people was unmistakable. He was a tyrant. Everything in the empire revolved around his whims.

“I have no particular destination in mind. Perhaps I should take a look at the adventurer’s guild?”

The guild was in the southwest block of the third layer of the capital, the part of the city Hanakawa had arrived in when he first got there. The Creator Akinobu Marufuji had turned the buildings into enormous living creatures and sent them on a rampage, but Luna had erased them along with the rest of the block. The city was divided up by walls, each section being referred to as a block. Passing through the gates between blocks, Hanakawa headed for his destination.

“Everything seems back to normal... Or perhaps not?” Although it had been reduced to an empty field, there were now roads and buildings again. But they were all entirely new. “I shudder to think of what happened to the

people. Hmm, I suppose I should see the guild first. I wouldn't mind finally having the chance to register as an adventurer."

The cityscape was more or less back to its original layout, so he had a good idea where the guild was located. After a while, he found it but then stumbled. Someone had pushed him from the side. Caught off guard, Hanakawa let himself get pushed into an alley between buildings.

"Whoa, whoa! What on earth are you doing?!"

By the time he realized what was happening, he was surrounded. Four masked men blocked either end of the alley, two on each side of him.

"Wh-What is it you intend with me?! If you lay a hand on me, the emperor will not forgive you!"

"Like I care," one of the men spat as they drew their swords.

"No way! The emperor's authority is being ignored! Wait, aren't you all Miss Luna's bodyguards?"

Though only to a limited degree, Hanakawa could read the stats of others. They must have covered their faces, knowing it would be bad if they got recognized, but that didn't help them at all against Hanakawa.

"I-If you do something like this, it will cause great problems for Miss Luna!"

"As long as you're alive, Lady Luna can't live in peace."

"She lives in constant fear of your shadow."

"Lady Luna has no idea we are doing this."

"Once you are dead, we will all die to cover our shame. Our actions have nothing to do with her."

"We have resolved ourselves to that end no matter what!"

They seemed determined to attack him, even if it meant their own deaths, leaving him no place to run.

Th-That is okay. I am still a Healer! As long as I avoid being killed instantly, I should be able to manage! I just need to prepare myself for the pain it will entail...

Hanakawa possessed attack magic that could defeat a single opponent if he had to. Healing himself while taking their attacks, he could bring the assailants down one at a time. But these men were extremely determined. They had no concern for their own survival.

"These people intend to rush me all at once, even if it kills them in the process!"

Hanakawa braced himself to charge. He would throw his full weight at them, grabbing the blades of their swords with his bare hands, ignoring any injury to himself. It was unlikely they could stop a head-on charge, so he would start by attacking the one in front of him.

As he thought that, something flashed from deeper within the alley. The two men standing in front of Hanakawa fell over, and almost simultaneously, the two behind him collapsed as well. Throwing knives were embedded in their faces.

"This is... Well, frankly, I have no idea what is going on, but I suppose I am saved!"

"Hanakawa."

"Gah!" A shiver ran down his back as a voice called out to him from the alley.

"Come here. It's me, Mitadera."

Shigeto Mitadera—one of Hanakawa's classmates. He had the class of Master Oracle and was the one responsible for bringing Hanakawa to Ent in the first place. After encountering Yoshifumi in the bar, Hanakawa had heard he'd been chased down and killed by Rena.

"Uhh..." Hanakawa began to creep backwards. Though it seemed like Mitadera had saved him, the guy was responsible for much of Hanakawa's suffering in the past. He really didn't feel like talking to him.

"I'm not going to do anything bad to you. If you want me to apologize for everything before, then I'm sorry. So please listen to what I have to say."

"Oh... Then in that case, would you apologize on your hands and knees for me?"

"You... You really get full of yourself quick, don't you? Fine. I'll do whatever you want. Just come with me."

Hanakawa caught a sense of Shigeto's weakened state from his desperate voice. That was something he could work with.

Chapter 11 — Interlude: Smoke Bomb! All Rivers Lead to the Sea! Izuna Drop! Altered Draw, Invisible Slash!

For Ryouko, adapting to and continuing to live in this world was an attractive option. Her family was a terribly anachronistic clan of ninja, who were so despicable they sent their daughter on a life or death mission despite only being a child, even if she was a high school student. It was hard to believe she would have a happy life if she returned home. Even if she were to throw everything away and flee her family, she would be branded a traitor and hounded to the ends of the earth, and would never be able to find rest.

But if she stayed in this world, things would be different. Her family couldn't reach her here, and she was finally free from the ancient and unchanging iron code of the ninja. She could live however she wished here.

That said, this world is just too dangerous.

In the end, her decision to return home anyway was one of self-preservation. There was plenty of danger in her home world, but that was a danger that existed within the realm of common sense, and that of a ninja. It was totally different from the horrific dangers presented by things here, like the Sages, Aggressors, and Dark Gods.

Of course, there was someone like Yogiri Takatou in her home world as well, but things like that were hidden beneath the surface, unknown to the general populace. Even if the reality was the same, its presence or lack thereof on the surface of society made a big difference. If it wasn't made public, everything related to it would be shrouded in darkness, with considerable pressure to keep things as hidden as possible throughout the world. At the very least, there were no people like the Sages who could brazenly treat human life as being worth less than garbage. That difference was huge.

The problem would then be, even if I got home, how to explain what

happened here...

Would they believe her if she told them what had actually occurred?

"What ever happen, happen, yes?" Carol spoke up in broken Japanese from her side, pulling Ryouko out of her thoughts. "You're wondering what to do when we get back, right? Oh, I was just thinking the same thing. I didn't read your mind or anything," Carol added, meaning Ryouko's surprise must have shown on her face.

"I assume so. If you could actually read my mind, there'd be no point in showing it off."

It was the night after Yogiri and Tomochika had left the City of the War God. Having finished their preparations, Ryouko and Carol were about to leave the city themselves.

"If we get back, you can just tell them everything," Carol suggested. "Even if you tried to hide it, they have ways of making you talk, right? It'll just make you look bad if you try to cover anything."

Since ancient times, ninja acted as intelligence operatives. It was only natural that they were skilled at interrogation and had any number of methods to extract information from someone.

"It's complicated, isn't it? While we excel in forcing others to confess what they are hiding, we also have techniques to avoid giving in to such torture."

The idea of a ninja being captured by a rival organization was well within expectations. They couldn't have a captured operative sharing any confidential information with their captors, so of course they received training to protect the information they possessed in spite of any sort of torture. Even if she were to tell her family everything, a ninja would doubt that honesty. If she told them she had been sent to another world or something similar, that would make them doubt her sanity, they would assume she had been brainwashed, and their interrogation would only intensify.

"Want to come back with me then?" Carol offered. "We're pretty soft, you know? I also had the mission of watching Yogiri, but I never would have been forced to commit seppuku if I lost track of him."

"Ninja don't commit seppuku."

"Ohh! Really?!"

Ryouko's mission had been to observe and protect Yogiri Takatou.

Though they could hardly have predicted something like being transported to another world, she had lost track of him. It was hard to believe they would let her off the hook for that when she had been right beside him at the start. There would no doubt be some sort of punishment waiting for her.

"We'd love to have a real ninja join us. Smoke bomb! All Rivers Lead to the Sea! Izuna Drop! Altered Draw, Invisible Slash!"

"What kind of organization are you?"

"If you join us, I'll tell you."

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Ryouko had assumed Carol was part of some sort of American intelligence agency, but that wasn't necessarily the case. At the moment, though, it didn't really matter whether she knew or not.

Walking through the streets, they approached the city gate. Most cities in this world had walls built around them, and their gates would close at night, so they couldn't just walk out through the city gate like this.

"Was there even a reason for us to leave at night?" Ryouko asked.

"Partly because it took us until nighttime to get ready, but don't you think it's not very ninja-like to sleep well and leave first thing in the morning?"

"I guess it's fine. A wall like this isn't much of an obstacle." With some ninja tools, climbing such a wall would be easy enough. And with the Gift they had been given upon being summoned to this world, their physical abilities were boosted enough that they could have just jumped over it. Ryouko had planned to figure out exactly how they would do it once they made it to the wall, but as they approached the gate, they saw someone.

"Wait! Why are you trying to leave the city without saying anything to anyone?!"

A young girl and a woman with dark skin. Risley and Euphemia. Risley was a clone of the Sage Lain, while Euphemia was a half-demon who had been one of Lain's victims and thus turned into a vampire of her lineage. Ryouko and Carol had only heard rough details about them, but it seemed right now that Euphemia was acting as Risley's servant.

"We weren't that close, so I thought we could leave whenever we wanted." Though they had been together for a short time, Ryouko couldn't think of why Risley or the half-demons would object to them going anywhere.

"That's true, but..."

"You are leaving in search of Yogiri as well, correct?" Though Risley puffed up her cheeks in frustration, Euphemia continued calmly on her behalf.

"Yes, we are. Does that mean you intend to do the same?"

"Indeed. Risley said she wanted to search for him no matter what."

"I see. So you were waiting here for us?"

Ryouko and Carol had acted rather covertly on their way out of the city, but Euphemia was a vampire. Her senses far exceeded those of normal humans, so it wasn't surprising she had found them.

“Yes. We thought it might be more convenient if we were to work together. You know where Yogiri went, do you not?”

Ryouko and Carol shared a look. Should they answer? Should they travel with these two? Ryouko didn’t mind. She doubted they had any ulterior motives. Risley just wanted to see Yogiri, and Euphemia only wanted to respect Risley’s wishes. Two people with the Gift should have been able to travel in this world without issue, but there was no telling what would happen. It could be advantageous to have someone as powerful as a vampire as an ally. Apparently, Carol felt the same way, as she gave a light nod.

“Yes. We don’t know precisely where he was headed, but we can track what direction and how far away he is.” She then shared that Yogiri and Tomochika had headed east. “They were looking for Sages, right?”

“I heard they were searching for Philosopher’s Stones. Would you happen to know where the Sages are, Euphemia?” asked Risley.

“Unfortunately, I only know what is common knowledge about them. If you say east, the first thing that comes to mind is the Sage in the Empire of Ent, I suppose.”

Euphemia had inherited part of Lain’s memories and power, but they were only her memories and powers as a vampire. Her knowledge of things about the Sages was extremely vague, as if they had been blocked out somehow.

“If Takatou’s information is the same as ours, then he’s probably headed to find the Sage Yoshifumi in Ent,” Carol suggested.

Considering the information they had found after reaching this city, Ryouko also figured that was likely the case.

“If they have already boarded a ship heading for Ent, it may be difficult for us to catch up,” Euphemia replied. “There are few ships that go there. It may be a number of days before another sets sail.”

“Oh, maybe we should have been in a bit more of a hurry,” said Carol. But setting out after him with no preparations wouldn’t have been smart. There was no guarantee they would have caught him, so the possibility of a long journey meant they needed to prepare some sort of supplies.

“I suppose we will need some form of transportation,” Euphemia remarked.

“The only thing I can think of in this world is carriages. Is there something else we can use?” For a time, Yogiri and Tomochika had used an armored truck, but that was very much an exception for this world. The

chances that they would find something similar were incredibly slim.

"Lain had hidden refuges throughout the world," Euphemia told them. "I have memories of there being teleportation devices inside of them."

"What?!" Risley exclaimed, shocked. "That's the first I've heard of it! What was the point of all our traveling?!"

"The mansion you awoke in was especially isolated from her other properties, so it wasn't equipped to allow for teleportation to and from it."

"Oh, I see."

"Also, it's not like they exist everywhere, so they can't necessarily take us wherever we please."

"Is there one nearby?"

"Yes. It would require us to take a more roundabout path on our way to the port, but if there is a possibility we can teleport to Ent from there, I believe it is worth taking the time to check."

"I agree," Ryouko said. "If we're not going to catch up to them right away anyway, we should probably go check it out."

It was hard to believe there was something as convenient as instant teleportation that they could use, but Sion had used something similar to get around as well. It may have been a technique that was possible in this world.

"If he had just talked to us before leaving instead of sneaking away, it would have been easier..." If he had done that, they might have made it to Ent much faster. That seemed to be what Risley was thinking, and Ryouko couldn't help but agree.

"He must have really wanted to get away from you, Risley," Euphemia replied.

"Th-That's not true at all! He just said his priority was the Philosopher's Stones!"

"But he's going to use them to go back to his home world, right? If that's the case, then he would never be able to meet you again, which makes it seem like he doesn't care about you at all."

"Don't say that! I'll never be able to recover!"

"You two *are* master and servant, aren't you?" Carol asked, confused.

Euphemia seemed surprisingly merciless.

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Chapter 12 — Ugh... This Looks Like It's Going to Be a Pain

Tomochika, Yogiri, and Mokomoko walked down a road leading away from the city of Kadan. Vivian didn't pursue them. While it was certainly true she had felt intimidated after seeing Yogiri's power firsthand, it was really because she wasn't allowed to leave the city.

West Ent was being observed by some sort of power. A barrier had been set up in Kadan to interfere with that power, so as long as she stayed in the city, she shouldn't have been detected. But Vivian had ended up thoughtlessly leaving anyway and, in the process, had ended up destroying the barrier. At this stage, it seemed pointless to keep her confined there, but she was also a part of the plan to return the old royal family to power. Even if she was now an apostle, she couldn't throw all their planning away just to pursue Yogiri.

"Mokomoko, you're looking kind of scary!" Tomochika said.

The Enju robot had a faint smile on her face, held so perfectly it was like it was painted on. "There is not much I can do about that. I do not have the time to spare managing her facial expressions."

At the moment, Mokomoko's spirit form was high in the air above them. There was a strong possibility that others would come after them to attack Yogiri, so she was on lookout duty.

"It would be nice if they just attacked," Yogiri complained. If they tried to kill him, he would be able to detect them. But if they didn't have any intent to kill him, he wouldn't know they were approaching until they were close. It would be difficult to keep dealing with people like Vivian showing up, so he had asked Mokomoko to watch out for others.

"I feel kind of weird saying this, but what if they come after me?" Tomochika asked. She wasn't especially worried about her own life. She was more concerned about someone trying to take her hostage in an attempt to limit what Yogiri could do.

“Maybe I said this before, but as long as you’re close by, you’ll be fine. I can feel killing intent towards people near me too.”

“I realize it’s kind of late to say this, but that power really is unfair.”

“I was born with it, so I can’t do much even if you complain.”

“I guess there’s a lot I wouldn’t be able to deal with, so I’ll stick close to you.”

With Mokomoko’s help, Tomochika could handle close-quarters combat fairly well. But if some sort of strange power was used to attack her from afar, there wouldn’t be much she could do. Maybe she was just being self-indulgent, but it seemed like she had no choice but to rely on Yogiri.

“I wonder how much farther it is?”

“The map is...not very helpful, is it?” Yogiri pulled the map from their backpack. They had purchased it in Kadan.

Tomochika took a look at it as well. “This thing is totally useless!”

They were currently walking halfway up the inner eastern side of a large crater, but the crater itself wasn’t shown on the map. It had been created when Yoshifumi first invaded Ent. This map was from the royal era, so it didn’t reflect the current state of the landscape.

“Well, it seems the Elven Forest has always been there, so we should be able to find it somehow, right?”

“It doesn’t really help if we don’t know where we are now, though.”

The landscape around them varied immensely in elevation. There were plenty of rocky mountains and small craters all around them. As such, they could barely see anything in front of them.

“Something approaches from ahead,” Mokomoko warned.

A figure appeared in the gap between the mountains. As the person continued walking, they could make out that it was a man. He wasn’t armed, but he was watching them as they approached.

“What are the chances he’s just a random passerby?” Tomochika asked.

“He’s watching us.”

“Well, we’re the only ones around, and it’s not like you can’t say hello to someone you’re walking past... Oh, he stopped.”

The man had halted in the middle of the road, apparently trying to block their way.

“Hello,” Tomochika called out to him. They had no proof he was an enemy yet. If they could settle things peacefully, that would be best.

“My name is Zero. Absolute Zero.”

“Ugh... This looks like it’s going to be a pain,” Tomochika grumbled.

“Is that your real name?” Yogiri asked innocently.

“It is the name given to me as an apostle. With the new power bestowed upon me, a new name was necessary as well.”

“Do you think they all get like this when they become apostles, or do the gods specially pick people like this to become apostles?” Tomochika turned and asked Yogiri.

“I feel like it’s probably both. People who are already like this will just get even more full of themselves, don’t you think?” he answered. Then he turned back to Zero. “All right, then; let me ask you just in case: what do you want?”

“I am here to kill you, Yogiri Takatou. Woman, fear not, as you are not my target.”

“Oh, great.”

“If you’re going to go through the trouble of telling us your name, are you willing to talk first?” Yogiri asked.

“You wish for some last words before you pass on to Hades? Very well.”

“I feel like we’re not getting through to him...” Tomochika muttered.

“I guess they have the idea of Hades in this world too, huh?”

“I am sure that is just a result of the translation,” Mokomoko said.

Like Vivian, it didn’t seem like he was planning on attacking them right away.

“Did you know what my power was before you came all the way here?” Yogiri asked.

“Of course. Yours is the power to kill anything and everything, but even I can accomplish such a feat. My power is that of absolute zero. Before it, all things shall freeze.”

“Die.”

Zero fell to the ground.

“Was that really enough to decide to kill him?”

“He tried to use that absolute zero power or whatever.”

“We were the ones who asked him to talk, though... No, I guess we’d have died if he’d actually used it.”

“If he’s going to try to kill us, I don’t have a choice but to kill him back.”

In the end, this was the result of his own actions. Tomochika didn’t have

any pity for the people Yogiri killed either.

"It would really be more convenient if they just attacked us from a distance instead of coming out to meet us every time."

"That would definitely be easier. I don't really like killing people I've met face to face."

"I wonder how long this is going to last?"

"Until all the apostles are dead? We've already met three, so if it's the same as the twelve disciples, there should be nine left."

"Not that there's any reason to think there were twelve to start with."

Yogiri grabbed Zero's fallen body by the hand and threw it off the road.

"You can be really heartless, you know?" Tomochika commented.

"If we left him in the middle of the road, he'd be in the way, right?"

"There are no others in the area as far as I can see," Mokomoko reported.

"All right, let's go." They set off once again for the Elven Forest.

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Of course, not all of the apostles were so foolish as to meet Yogiri face to face. Tracy watched as Zero was defeated from a distance. She had been following Yogiri for a while, but she was far more careful. After hearing about his instant death ability from God, she refused to take him lightly. She hadn't even considered suddenly attacking him out of nowhere. First, she needed to wait and watch.

That, of course, opened the possibility of someone else getting to him first. If that happened, she'd have to give up. All it would mean was the loss of a power she had only recently been granted, so it wouldn't sting all that much. She would have to go back to her previous work as an adventurer.

Her ability was to be totally impossible to perceive. After receiving that power, she had briefly tested it out. Stealing things was simple. She could take fruit from a street stall and eat it in front of the owner without being noticed. He hadn't even noticed anything was missing until after Tracy had left, putting him outside the range of her ability. Money and valuables were similarly easy to take. She had already accumulated a fortune. Even if she were to lose this power, she would have enough wealth to take it easy for the rest of her life.

Killing people was simple enough as well. A little while ago, she had

attacked a party of adventurers that had taken a quest she had planned on doing herself. She slaughtered them effortlessly. After all, they couldn't even tell she was there. Even when she meticulously dug one of their hearts out of their chest and slashed open their throat, the others didn't even realize what had happened. Of course, when one of their companions was suddenly dead, they realized they had been attacked by something, but they never knew it had been Tracy. Understanding they were under attack by something invisible merely threw them into a panic. In the end, they had no way of fighting back against her.

So she had learned she could attack others unilaterally. However, there was always the possibility of one of her targets being able to fight back with indiscriminate attacks. Even if they didn't know where she was, if they scattered attacks around them, there was a chance they would hit her. But her power had already taken that into consideration. While it was active, her body was moved into something like a subspace, allowing her to pass through any attack unharmed, while anything she did would still have an effect on her targets.

Her power was truly invincible. With it, killing Yogiri would be easy. At least, after observing him for a while, that was what she decided. While his instant death ability was certainly terrifying, it required him to notice his opponent for him to activate it.

Having let his guard down after killing Zero, Tracy approached Yogiri from behind.

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The person with the ability to freeze everything was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

The person with the ability to be impossible to perceive was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

The person with the ability to move at the speed of light was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

The person with the ability to erase anything was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

The person with the ability to destroy continents was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

The person with the ability to nullify instant death abilities was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

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"Vivian, stop standing around, and get your things together!"

Vivian was brought back to her senses by Maanu's yelling. They were in Vivian's house, the home base for the survivors of the royal family.

"But the apostles keep dying..."

"Yes, you told me about the apostles. You certainly have some sort of new power. But now that we've been found out, we can't stay here."

The barrier had existed to hide the royal family. Even if they were to repair it, they had already been discovered, so they needed to move to the Elven Forest.

The forest was an inviolable domain. The eyes of the empire shouldn't have been able to reach them there. Whether they intended to set up a new base or cut through to invade the eastern side of the island, they needed to head there first.

"Yogiri Takatou...you must be pretty strong to have defeated so many apostles in a row."

But this wasn't the time to be impressed. The reason God was giving them information about who had failed against him was so that they could plan how to defeat him themselves.

Yet the boy with the sword who had gained Vivian's powers was dead. Her invincible shield and resurrection powers hadn't worked against Yogiri's instant death.

"Honestly, doesn't it seem like I can't win with this power?!"

"Shut up and get to work!"

"Y-Yes ma'am!"

Vivian wondered whether she could gain any more powers.

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"What the hell kind of Elven Forest is this?!"

After having entered the forest, Tomochika ranted loudly to no one in particular.

“I mean, with this many trees around, it’s obviously a forest, right?”

“This is a *jungle*! It’s totally a rainforest! It’s so hot!”

Everything in front of them was green. Leaves crowded their vision, and vines hung from the trees. The air was filled with the smell of plants and the weight of intense humidity. Colorful birds flitted through the greenery, and they could hear the sounds of animals growling and barking in the distance.

“An Elven Forest is supposed to be more, like, mysterious. With beautiful springs of water! And a refreshing breeze, and everything glitters in the sunlight, and fairies frolicking around! Something like that!”

“They aren’t fairies, I guess, but there are a lot of bugs flying around,” Yogiri noted.

“Why did they have to replace the fairies with moths the size of my hand?!”

“Oh, look, it’s a rhinoceros beetle. It’s huge!” He pointed out an insect about twenty centimeters long, clinging to the side of a tree.

“Don’t turn back to a kid on me now!”

“The climate here is crazy too. Just a little while ago, it felt like it was spring.”

“I can see why the royals needed to prepare to get through here,” Tomochika agreed. Maanu had made it sound like they would need quite some time to make their preparations.

“I guess this is what you should expect from another world. Even though we’ve barely moved at all, the climate has totally changed.”

“They do attribute the change in climate to the spirits, I heard.”

“This world isn’t a globe like ours is,” Mokomoko interjected. “The common sense of Earth doesn’t apply here.”

“Can we really get through this brush?” Tomochika asked. “There isn’t even a road.”

“We don’t have any other ideas. The mountains in the north are pretty far away.”

“I guess we’ll have to cut our way through, literally.” As Mokomoko said that, Furemaru burst forth from all over Enju’s body, taking the form of numerous blades. “I shall carve us a path!”

“Are you sure that’s okay? Won’t the elves get angry? They’ll say something like, ‘How dare you harm our holy forest!’”

“Dannoura, do you really still think that the elves in this forest will be like

that?”

“I’m hoping there’s a chance.”

“Right... Well, it’s good that you don’t give up on your dreams, at least...”

Mokomoko swung her blades around vigorously, tearing apart the leaves and plant growth, and creating an easy path for them to move forward.

Chapter 13 — Even If It Is a Cliché, This Is When a Goddess Should Appear!

“Honestly, seeing another apologize to you on their hands and knees is truly a heartwarming sensation!”

Hanakawa looked down at Shigeto, who was on his hands and knees. Leaning back in his chair with his arms crossed, the teen’s posture screamed arrogance.

They were in a private house. No one was living there at the moment, so Shigeto had made it into a sort of home base.

“I’m sorry about everything before. I apologize. Please help me save Rei.”

Of the three classmates who had brought him to this continent, Shigeto Mitadera was kneeling before him, Akinobu Marufuji had been killed by Rena, and Rei Kushima had been taken captive by her. Hanakawa had suffered tremendously at the hands of those three. Now that he was free of them, he felt no obligation to help them in the slightest. While he wasn’t sure he could call his life right now “happy,” it felt like a waste to go out of his way to ruin the measure of peace he had obtained.

“Hmm. I feel somehow that you lack sincerity. Even on your hands and knees, your pride still irritates me. Despite having lowered your head, you are still looking down on me, are you not?”

“You bastard...”

“See? It takes almost nothing to strip the facade away. You still despise me, so you are probably thinking something like, ‘Why do I have to bow my head to this guy? I even apologized on my hands and knees, so be thankful and cooperate!’ Your true feelings are positively leaking out of you.”

“Urgh...” Shigeto was at a loss for words, suggesting that Hanakawa was exactly right.

“I have not forgotten the things you did to me. Remember when you made me charge a group of enemies naked? Or when you made me search for items within the feces of a dragon? Those were all for nothing, weren’t they?”

“I mean...I’m sorry... That was wrong of us.”

“I must say, I am not fond of this attitude of, ‘I already apologized, so hurry up and forgive me!’ Do you intend to tell me I am narrow-minded for refusing to forgive you?”

“I just saved you earlier!”

“Oh? You think that makes us even? My, what a flimsy apology.”

“Cut it out already. Stop acting all arrogant just because I’m trying to be humble.”

“All you have is that Book of Prophecy, correct? That useless hint book? You have no combat power like Sir Ragna or Sir Marufuji did. No matter how frightening a face you try to present, it is not intimidating in the least.”

Shigeto’s abilities couldn’t be used directly for combat, but by using the information in his Book of Prophecy, he could efficiently collect all sorts of items. He had powerful weapons and armor that an ordinary person could never obtain. Using those, he had a considerable amount of combat ability. Under normal circumstances, Hanakawa wouldn’t stand a chance against him. But he wasn’t the least bit frightened by him now.

“Or will you attempt violence against me once again? I don’t even particularly mind. But the quest it would generate would be an issue for you, wouldn’t it?”

Abby, one of the Four Heavenly Kings, had all of the Empire of Ent under observation. Of course, she couldn’t see the fine details of everything that happened. She could only pick up on events that met a certain threshold of significance. Once she did, a quest would be created and adventurers would be dispatched to resolve the situation. As the court jester serving the emperor directly, Hanakawa was under observation as well. Although she wasn’t monitoring his every action, if he were to die, she would undoubtedly notice. That same observation network was used to determine if Hanakawa had left the capital or not as well.

“You must be fully aware of how dangerous it is to associate with me,” Hanakawa continued, “so for you to come to me regardless must mean you are terribly desperate, no?”

“Please... I won’t ask you to do anything to jeopardize your position, so __”

“Hmm, I wonder about that.”

Seeing Sir Mitadera beg like this is truly gratifying... But cooperate with

him?

Rei was under Rena's supervision. If Hanakawa assisted in rescuing her, that would put his position in jeopardy. If he wanted to maintain his current place, he should avoid getting involved.

That said, I have no idea how long the Sage's whims will remain in my favor...

If he were dismissed from his role as court jester, he had plenty of enemies who would jump at the chance to kill him. He had gotten far too carried away with his freedom. Building up a cooperative relationship with Shigeto might not be a bad way of acquiring some insurance.

However, that cooperation could be what results in my dismissal.

Hanakawa was pulled from his thoughts by a crunching noise.

"Uh, what? 'Crunch'?"

Someone had stepped on the back of Shigeto's head. The crunching sound seemed to be the sound of the bones in his face being smashed.

Hanakawa looked up to find the owner of the foot. A beautiful young girl wearing a puffy, ill-fitting dress was pressing Shigeto's face into the floor.

"If he's bothering you, you can hurt him as much as you want," she said. "By all means, I'll do it for you." Without waiting for a response, she continued to stomp on the back of Shigeto's head.

"Wait! Please, wait!" Hanakawa tried to stop her. "Where did you—err, more importantly, who are you?!"

The girl's foot stopped mid-air. "I am Navi, the unreliable hint book you mentioned earlier, now taking the form of a person."

"Th-That's not fair, Sir Mitadera! How are you so lucky as to have your Gift personified as a beautiful young female partner?!"

"I doubt he's in a state to answer anymore, so asking him won't get you very far."

"Fine! I'll listen to what you have to say! Please stop!" Hanakawa begged her. Bewildered by the sudden outbreak of violence, he couldn't say anything else.

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Hanakawa, Shigeto, and Navi sat at a table. Hanakawa had healed Shigeto's injuries so that he could talk again.

“That was going too far...” Shigeto grumbled.

“The prophecy said that this was the best way to get Hanakawa to listen. And look, he’s listening now, isn’t he?” Navi didn’t seem the least bit bothered by his complaints.

“I said I would listen, but whether I assist or not depends on the details,” Hanakawa clarified.

“Yeah, that’s fine.”

“You’ve already been helping us, in a way,” Navi added.

“What do you mean?”

“Rena, one of the Four Heavenly Kings, has moved out of the palace. That was because of your incessant sexual harassment, wasn’t it?”

“Oh! I’m pretty good, aren’t I?”

“What kind of harassment would make one of the leaders of the empire run away?” Shigeto mumbled, astonished.

“The security at the palace is strict, so as long as Rei was being held there, we wouldn’t have been able to do anything before,” Navi explained. “But now there is a chance we can save her.”

“I see. So I suppose you should be thankful to me, Sir Mitadera!”

“You want me to thank you for sexually harassing people?”

“Quite so!”

Shigeto made a bitter face. “Thank you... You really helped us...”

“Your tone sounds rather insincere, but that is fine.”

“So,” Navi continued, “we would be thankful if you could keep it up.” She pulled out a slip of paper. Unfolded, it was large enough to cover the whole table.

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“What is this?”

“These are the bases of Luna, Rena, and Abby.” It was a map of the entire capital. Symbols and letters were written across it in various places.

“Ohh! I was in quite some trouble, not knowing where they had gone! Is this the power of prophecy?”

“Yes. I can create as much paper as I need and transfer any data onto it.”

“That is quite impressive.”

“I’ll give this to you. We want you to cooperate, but we won’t ask you to do anything dangerous. We just want you to keep doing what you have been doing so far.”

“In what way?”

“We want you to continue harassing the female leaders of the empire.”

“I see. And you will make use of that chaos.”

“What kind of sexual harassment are you going to do that’s going to cause ‘chaos’?” Shigeto interjected again.

“But would it not be sufficient to merely bother Miss Rena?”

“We don’t want them to know that Rena is our target.”

“I see, so you wish them to believe I am doing no more than making my usual passes at them!”

So far, it didn’t seem like anything all that dangerous. If he had been asked to contact Rei, or get her out himself, or set things up so that they could break into Rena’s mansion, it would have been another matter, but all they wanted was for him to continue behaving as he had been.

“Very well! Even if they are leaders of an evil empire, earning such displeasure from beautiful ladies like that is somewhat unpleasant, but if it is for Sir Mitadera’s and Miss Rei’s sake, then it shall be done!”

“Man, you really are awful when no one is holding you back,” Shigeto muttered. “I’m not sure it’s okay to leave a guy like you on the loose.”

Hanakawa folded up the map and put it in his pocket. “However, you came to this country to defeat the Sage, did you not? That seems impossible now, so what do you plan to do next?” Saving Rei was fine, but he was curious about what they’d do after accomplishing that.

“Well...”

“We’ll still take him down,” Navi said confidently, despite Shigeto’s hesitation, surprising him as well.

“I-Is that so? I believe you would be better off fleeing once Miss Rei has

been emancipated!”

“What? Are you serious?” Shigeto cried. “He killed Ragna instantly. There’s no way we could beat him!”

“And if we run, where exactly are we supposed to go in this world that’s ruled over by Sages?” asked Navi.

“When I said I wanted to save Rei, you said I would be better off running away!”

“I meant that you should retreat and make preparations. What would running away forever accomplish?”

“Hold on! You’re supposed to be a Book of Prophecy. Don’t try to decide my goals for me!” Having lost the will to fight the Sages, Shigeto’s voice was tinged with anger.

“My apologies. But as a Book of Prophecy, I have a natural instinct to lead my owner towards their final objective.”

“Please, Miss Navi,” Hanakawa cut in. “No matter what you say, defeating Lord Yoshifumi is entirely impossible. Even I thought to keep an eye open for any openings he might show, but there has been nothing I can do against him.”

“Even if there *was* an opening, what would *you* be able to do?” Shigeto replied.

“This isn’t just about Yoshifumi,” insisted Navi. “We could defeat all the other Sages too. What we need to accomplish that is the World Sword Omega Blade.”

“Ah, you did mention something edgy like that before,” Hanakawa remarked. “If I recall, that is the reason we came to this nation in the first place. Do you really believe you can defeat a Sage with one or two of those swords?”

“Yes. That is why it exists. If we can get a hold of it, we should be able to manage.”

“I suppose we were indeed gathering materials for it. Do you mean to say you have collected everything you need?”

“Those were materials to strengthen the blade. The sword won’t show its true strength right when we first get it.”

It didn’t seem like she intended to share any further information.

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Hanakawa returned to the palace. He now knew where the other leaders' homes were outside the palace, but a lot had happened today, so he was fairly tired. If he was going to do anything, he would have to start tomorrow.

Returning to his room, he lay down on his bed. Closing his eyes, he immediately began to feel sleepy.

"Hm? What is this?" The next thing he knew, he was in an empty white space. "Is this a dream? Did I truly fall asleep so quickly?"

"I am Malnarilna." A bearded old man was standing in front of him.

"What? Who is that?"

"I am God."

"Ha ha, so it's finally that time, then? The time to bestow upon me new powers as I am sent to another world... Except I've already been suffering in another world for quite some time now!"

"What are you angry about?" Surprised by Hanakawa's sudden outburst, the old man calling himself Malnarilna cocked his head in confusion.

"At any rate, a bearded old man is no good for a god! Even if it is a cliché, this is when a goddess should appear!"

"Oh, really? You don't like the old guy?"

"I see, so you want a goddess." Suddenly, Malnarilna spoke with the voice of a child. And then he split in two.

"Really, ever since we took the name Malnarilna, everyone assumed we looked like this. No one's complained about it before!"

"Did you know we were goddesses already?" The old man vanished, replaced with two cute young girls who looked like twins.

"Uhhh...what?"

"I'm Malna!"

"I'm Rilna!"

"The two of us together are Malnarilna! Yay!"

They clapped their hands together, perfectly in sync.

Chapter 14 — Daimon Hanakawa, Beautiful Girl Version?!

“This is a dream, correct?! Then there should be no problem if I hug you and lick you, right?!”

Hanakawa jumped forward as if to grab the two calling themselves Malna and Rilna. Perhaps because it was a dream, he flew forward easily, but he never reached them. Though he had jumped quite a distance, he fell and his face struck something like a floor. It was an empty white space, but there was still some sort of ground here. He and the two girls had been standing on the same surface, but when he looked up, the distance between them hadn’t changed.

“Huh? How could someone at level ninety-nine like myself fail to reach?” But even at level ninety-nine, Hanakawa’s physical attributes weren’t that high. The stats of a back line support character like him weren’t that well-suited to physical combat.

“Because it’s a dream.”

“It’s a dream, so everything goes exactly like we want it to.”

“So, what is it you wish from me?” Even if this was a dream, if a god was appearing to him, it must have wanted something from him.

“You know Yogiri Takatou, right?”

“Yogiri Takatou? I do, but...” Hanakawa’s current situation could be said to be a result of Yogiri’s actions. His fear of Yogiri had sunk deep into his bones, so he wanted to avoid contact with him as much as possible.

“So, like, we sent some assassins after him.”

“We sent apostles after him.”

“I imagine no matter who you sent, it was all for nothing,” Hanakawa replied. “He is just far too absurd.”

“Yeah, he’s been killing them all.”

“Even though we gave them powers that we thought could beat him.”

“Oh? For example?”

“Like a sword that can cut through anything.”

“It could even cut through things like space and concepts.”

“Or the power to destroy continents.”

“Destroying the world is too much, but just an island or a continent isn’t that bad.”

“But it was all pointless.”

“Of course it would be.” Hanakawa nodded. “Simply bringing powerful attacks to bear means nothing to him.”

Yogiri’s ability to inflict instant death at will wasn’t what made him terrifying. If that’s all it was, there would be plenty of ways to deal with him. The truly terrifying power he possessed was the ability to detect killing intent and preempt it. No matter how powerful your attacks were, you would be crushed before you could use them.

“If you are gods, should you not be able to do something about him?”

“We can.”

“Really?!”

“Yeah. I mean, we’re God. Of course we can compel lower lifeforms to obey us. So if we tell him to die, he’ll die, right?”

“Then why not do that?”

Hanakawa would have been only too happy for Yogiri to die. Who knew when he would come across him again or when Yogiri would decide to kill him? So if someone could get rid of the guy for him, Hanakawa would be ecstatic.

“But you see, just because we *can* doesn’t mean we *should.*”

“If we do that, isn’t it like admitting we lost?”

“If we killed a kid because he said something that made us angry, we’d be criticized, wouldn’t we?”

“The other gods would make fun of us.”

“Is that how it is?” Hanakawa asked.

“So we gave people powers and made them apostles, then said, ‘Go kill Yogiri Takatou!’”

“But it’s getting kind of boring thinking up new powers to give to people.”

“We thought, wouldn’t it be better if everyone thought up their own powers?”

“Umm...judging from the flow of this conversation, it sounds as if you

intend to send me to kill him as well...”

“Of course.”

“Noooooooo!”

Hanakawa immediately turned and ran at full speed. But this was a dream under the control of a god. There was nowhere for him to go in this empty white space. When he finally exhausted himself and turned back around, the distance between them hadn’t changed.

“It’s impossible! A commoner like myself can do nothing against him! And why me in the first place?! There are plenty of others you could choose!”

“Because you know each other.”

“He is not someone so merciful as to spare me because we are acquaintances!”

Hanakawa had watched Yogiri kill their classmates without a second thought. Whether or not they knew each other, Yogiri wouldn’t hold back.

“You’ve seen his power before.”

“And you know all sorts of stupid stuff, right?”

“You’re one of those otaku, aren’t you? So you know what’s strong and what should be able to beat him, don’t you?”

“Please, have mercy on me! If you are willing to grant any power someone asks for, there should be any number of people willing to take my place!”

The thought of God granting a person any power they wished for was truly enticing, but it lost all of its allure if it was for the sake of fighting Yogiri.

“If you don’t want to, that’s fine, but we’ll just leave you like this ’til you change your mind.”

“You’ll be sleeping forever, you know?”

“Wait, that is also a problem!” Hanakawa cried. “I just received a map describing the locations of the heads of the empire!”

“Of course, you’ll be set free once we get bored and let go of the dream.”

“Do you want to try an endurance contest with a god? A hundred or a thousand years is easy for us.”

“Ugh... Do you really wish such torment on me?” Their treatment of him was gentle and not the least bit scary, so they were a little better to deal with than the other unreasonable people he had encountered. But it didn’t change

the fact that their decision was absolute, and Hanakawa had no choice in the matter. “Fine...I will try.”

“Great!”

“Hurray!”

“Okay, we’ll call you later.”

“So think of which power you want.”

Suddenly, he was looking at the ceiling of his room. He had woken up.

“Hmm. If I think about it, this may not be so bad. Even if I receive a power from them, I can just avoid meeting Takatou, correct?”

Basic rules started filtering into his head somehow.

If Yogiri dies, the apostles all lose their powers. However, the one who kills him will keep their power as a reward.

You will be given the power to see which direction and how far away Yogiri is.

If you kill another apostle, you gain their powers.

There were a lot of other apostles, so it should have been fine if he left it to someone more motivated.

“After all, no matter what power I receive, it will be useless. So it would be best to think of something that would have value to me even after I lose it.”

For example, a power that involved creating things. If the things he made remained, he just needed to make a lot of stuff to use after his power disappeared.

“I’m sure someone more motivated than me will come along.”

Plenty of people would be loath to lose the powers they had obtained. Those motivated apostles would do everything in their power to keep them. At least, that’s what Hanakawa thought, but there seemed to be a bit of a catch.

“In that case, if everyone chose to leave Yogiri Takatou alone, they could all continue to use their powers forever, couldn’t they?”

“Oh! That’s true!”

Hanakawa gave a surprised shout as he was startled off his bed by the sudden voice beside him. Malna and Rilna were standing there.

“Everyone was super motivated because they received a mission from

God, so we didn't worry about it before."

"But there will probably be people who think they don't have to fight at all."

"Like Hanakawa!"

"Wh-Why did you appear here all of a sudden?! If you could do that, why did you show up in a dream before?!"

"For the show?"

"Gods normally appear in people's dreams, right?" The two of them did appear to be gods after all, capable of doing whatever they wanted.

"It'll be a problem if you take too long, so I guess we should put a time limit on it."

"So what should we do?"

"Maybe one person has to fight him every day?"

"And if no one does, they all die?"

"Excuse me," Hanakawa interrupted, "but, for example, even if I were to leave now to go fight Takatou, it would take me more than a day to reach him."

After all, he had no idea where Yogiri was. Knowing the general direction and rough distance didn't help that much.

"Okay, then we'll give you the ability to teleport to him once."

"Urgh...with all due respect, I feel as if I'm digging my own grave..." He should have just kept his mouth shut. But as gods, they may have been able to read his mind anyway. In the end, this was just his fate.

"So, while you're thinking of powers, we want you to give advice to the others as well."

"What do you mean?" Hanakawa asked.

"Just like we did a second ago."

"We want you to show up in people's dreams and help them decide what kind of power they want. That should be helpful in deciding on a power for yourself as well."

"Umm, about that," Hanakawa replied. "Perhaps it is strange for me to point this out, but I don't believe it would be an advantage to anyone to have me appear in their dreams."

Having Hanakawa show up when God was bestowing powers on people would just spoil the moment.

"It's fine, leave it to us!"

“We’ll give you a good body!”

“Hiyah!”

Malna and Rilna lifted their hands towards him, making a silly noise. A glittering light shone from them, washing over Hanakawa.

“Did something change? Oh, my voice?” His voice suddenly sounded strangely high-pitched. He hurriedly turned to look in the mirror, where a young girl stared back at him. He was now a cute girl, somehow similar to Malna and Rilna.

“Okay, so we’ll have you show up in people’s dreams like that.”

“Th-This is Daimon Hanakawa, beautiful girl version?! Not that there are any traces of my original appearance left...”

“I mean, if we left anything, you’d look gross.”

“True enough!” Hanakawa agreed. He didn’t feel all that bad about it.

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If no one challenges Yogiri Takatou for a full day, all apostles will die.
You will each be able to teleport to an area near Yogiri Takatou one time.

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“Chainsaw Shield Boomerang!”

The chainsaw shield flew forward and back, cutting through three mohawked men. Vivian caught the returning shield out of the air. She had gotten used to it by now. Behind her, Maanu was using a morning star to smash other similar ruffians. Another man wearing black plate mail cut apart distant enemies without even drawing his sword. These three, along with the plump man pulling their wagon, made up the remnants of the royal family hiding in Kadan. Though the entire city worked together to keep them hidden, these four were the only ones with any relation to the royal family. But that was just the portion of the family hiding in Kadan. Vivian wasn’t the only one to have escaped. The royals had scattered across all of West Ent, waiting for their chance to return.

“It seems we’re finished here.”

Although it had been an easy fight, Maanu’s voice seemed despondent. They were traveling through a wasteland on their way to the Elven Forest.

They had been attacked by a band of ruffians and had cut them down. Their mohawked foes had once been citizens of the kingdom.

The people of the old kingdom were divided into two groups in West Ent: townsfolk and ruffians. The townsfolk lived by meager means, providing help for adventurers. Ruffians attacked the townsfolk and were killed by adventurers. The empire had given those roles to them. Though the ruffians were weak-willed enough to turn to a life of banditry, that didn't change that they had been citizens of the same kingdom. It was normal to want to avoid killing them.

"There is nothing to be done about it," the man in black armor said. "Even if they were once our citizens, they will not listen to what we have to say." He was a knight of the former royal guard, Gale. Feared as the Black Knight, he had studied under a Swordmaster and obtained the rank of Heavenly Blade.

Aside from the rank of Swordmaster itself, swordsmen were divided up into nine ranks: Absolute Blade, Demolishing Blade, Thunderous Blade, Resonating Blade, Heavenly Blade, Dragon Blade, Royal Blade, Beastial Blade, and Steel Blade. Heavenly Blade was ranked fifth. The rank of Royal Blade was one that could be reached with effort, and described a person with the ability of an ordinary master. Those holding ranks of Dragon Blade or higher possessed either the talent of a genius or had received a rare Gift, propelling them past the usual domain of human ability. In short, the ruffians who had fallen in this wasteland never stood a chance against him, as he possessed a transcendental level of swordsmanship, something ordinary people could never match.

"Lady Vivian, could you please remain close to the cart? The barrier means nothing if you leave it," the plump man pulling the cart, the barrier mage Nicholas, begged her. A barrier had been set up around the cart specifically to hide her presence.

"What is the point now?" she replied. "We've already been discovered. We just need to hurry up and reach the Elven Forest."

"Lady Vivian, it would be best if we didn't have to face additional enemies."

Gale didn't approve of Vivian joining the fighting either. The kind of moving barrier they were using was rather small, so if she moved around too much, their position would be discovered. And if they were found, an

Emergency Quest would be issued and adventurers would be dispatched.

"Vivian! I told you not to do anything!" Maanu shouted.

"How come you are the only one who doesn't call me 'Lady'? You don't have to pretend we're ordinary townsfolk anymore."

"I'm not going to start calling you 'Lady Vivian' now!"

"Oh, another revelation!"

"Don't try and change the subject!"

"No, I'm serious. What? If no one challenges Yogiri, we die? That's ridiculous!" A new rule had just been added.

"Let us hurry," Gale urged them onward. "If we don't make it by the scheduled time, they will leave without us."

Something strange had happened in the Elven Forest. Taking that opportunity, the royal family had gathered from across West Ent to assault the region. Even if they kept the presence of the royals a secret, the empire would grow suspicious if it saw a large group heading towards the forest. They couldn't turn back now.

"Yes! Towards our objective, the World Sword Omega Blade!"

"Why are you blurting that out now?! Idiot! You idiot!"

"But no one is listening." Vivian began to tear up.

Chapter 15 — Weren't You Proudly Saying a Little While Ago That You Exterminated Giant Centipedes?

The Elven Forest was uncharted territory for the adventurers of the Empire of Ent, to the point where one might doubt the accuracy of their title. While one could assume that they went on adventures to places filled with danger, in reality, they only operated within the adventurer system.

The system clearly defined whether a quest had been cleared or not and could provide an appropriate reward for the exact number of enemies slain. But the Elven Forest was protected by a mysterious power that isolated it from the outside. It was the domain of monsters, a place beyond the management of the empire's adventurer system. For that reason, people rarely ventured there. Doing so would only get them attacked by elves and monsters, and no matter how many of the enemy they killed, they wouldn't get any reward, so it was a waste of time.

But now that an EX difficulty quest had been issued—"Head to the Elven Forest and Eliminate the Remnants of the Royal Family"—the situation was different. This was a special kind of quest. The royal family was headed to the Elven Forest, so the adventurers needed to go there and hunt them down. Such hunting quests weren't particularly rare, but the requirement to complete this one was new. This time, they needed to bring the royals' heads back to the capital. Anyone who did that would be rewarded however they liked.

There were five survivors of the royal family. Naturally, it would be first come, first served, so the adventurers had been stirred to action. The royal family were just humans, so killing them would be easy enough. Even the weakest adventurers had a chance if they could find them first.

Adventurers began to flood into the Elven Forest.

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“So that’s why there are heaps of dead low-level adventurers everywhere,” Takuya said. His class was Samurai, matching the armor and helmet that he wore.

“Adventurers all have the Gift, so they naturally become overconfident,” replied the Mage Kaname in a self-deprecating tone. Her robe and staff left no doubt about her class. The majority of those who became adventurers in Ent had the Gift. Without it, fighting against monsters was more or less impossible. The adventurer system existed only to judge adventurers; it didn’t provide them any sort of power.

“What do you think about killing the royal family? It sounds to me like theirs is the side of justice,” Kimitaka the Assassin said, clearly unhappy. Wearing clothes appropriate to one’s class boosted their abilities, so most adventurers wore matching outfits, but the clothes Kimitaka wore didn’t bear any such notable characteristics.

The three of them made up the Rank S party Gehenna.

“Worrying about the details of the quests won’t get us very far,” Takuya said.

“I wouldn’t want to lose my qualifications as an adventurer for defying the empire,” Kaname added.

“That’s true, I guess.”

They were at the first point of entry for the Elven Forest coming from East Ent. Corpses that looked like adventurers lay scattered all around them, crawling with insects.

“Falcon Circle Cut!” Takuya drew his sword, slicing the swarming insects in half.

“I don’t know if we should be wasting our time fighting these,” Kaname commented. “No matter how many we kill, the reward won’t change.”

“But we can’t just let them go after we see them.” If they ignored the insects and walked past, they could be attacked from behind. Still, killing a few dozen of them didn’t accomplish anything.

The forest around them erupted with screeching, and before they knew it, they were surrounded by insects of all sizes.

“Dammit! Falcon Circle Cut!”

“Multiple Fireburst!”

Takuya and Kaname unleashed area of effect attacks, slicing apart and incinerating the swarm.

“Isn’t using fire in a forest kind of dangerous?”

“Don’t worry about it. I *wish* this forest could burn that easily.”

The Elven Forest was nothing more than in the way. People had tried to cut it down or burn it to the ground multiple times, but no matter what they did, the forest wouldn’t shrink by an inch. If they cut down a significant number of trees, the trees simply grew back immediately, and if they set one or two on fire, the fire never spread.

The screech of insects continued.

“There’re still more!” cried Takuya. “What is going on?!”

“Maybe they’re calling friends!” Kaname suggested.

The creatures continue appearing in droves. None of them were individually very strong, but the more the trio killed, the more appeared to replace them.

“There’s a clearing up ahead. We should be able to make a stand there,” Kimitaka said, having yet to participate in the fight. The Assassin class didn’t particularly excel in group combat, but it possessed skills in information and intelligence gathering.

“Okay!”

Kicking the insects out of their way, the three ran forward. In short order, they reached a clearing just like Kimitaka had said.

Takuya glanced back. “The bugs aren’t following?”

“Maybe they don’t want to leave the trees,” Kaname offered. The clearing had nothing but short grass.

“Let’s take a break and think of a plan— What?!” The ground began to shake, and the moment he began to grow suspicious, Takuya’s body sank into it. In a split second, everything below his waist had disappeared.

“A pitfall trap?” said Kaname.

“Hurry up and pull me out— Gah!” The ground swelled up for a moment, covering Takuya’s upper body. “Th-This is...a camouflaged slime...”

The swollen ground had turned translucent. Within it they could see his body, gradually staining the fluid of the slime red with blood. “Dammit! My body!” A S Rank adventurer wouldn’t die from such an injury, but it would cripple his ability to fight.

A terrifying howl split the air.

“Now what?!”

Another creature appeared, an insect big enough that they had to look up

at it. The enormous beetle's footsteps shook the ground as it stepped into the clearing.

"L-Let's run!" yelled Kaname.

"Hey, don't leave me behind!"

But none of them were able to escape. The enormous horn on the rhinoceros beetle's head began to spark before lightning shot out across the clearing, striking everything indiscriminately. The slime burst, spewing its contents everywhere, while the members of Gehenna were burned to a crisp. The beetle then nonchalantly stepped into the clearing and slurped up the remains of the dead slime.

"Th-This is...completely different than outside..."

After finishing its meal, the beetle continued marching forward. It couldn't have cared less about the adventurers and trampled them to death without noticing.

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"It's so hot," Tomochika complained, exhausted. While she certainly had much more endurance than Yogiri did, when it came to sheer discomfort, there was nothing she could do about it.

The climate in the Elven Forest was like that of a rainforest. They pushed through air thick with humidity and the smell of plants, literally cutting a path through the greenery. The elevation varied significantly, so even advancing a short way was an incredible challenge.

Tomochika had returned to wearing something like a swimsuit. Even Yogiri had finally put away his customary school uniform shirt and tie in favor of a thinner top. Normally, dressing so lightly in the jungle was suicidal. Having bare skin should have made them easy prey for leeches, mosquitos, and ticks, but thanks to Yogiri's power, they were able to manage. Just by approaching them, all potential threats died.

"Hey, is the ground shaking?!"

Now that Tomochika mentioned it, Yogiri noticed that the ground seemed to be moving. It didn't feel like an earthquake, more like it was shaking in a fixed rhythm from a low sound. Gradually, the sound became louder and louder. The sound of something heavy enough to make the ground thunder as it pushed its way through the trees, breaking and snapping them as it passed,

growing ever closer.

The source of the noise then arrived, kicking over a tree as it appeared in front of them.

“What?! Is that an elephant?!” cried Tomochika.

“Its skin seems a little too glossy for that,” Mokomoko observed.

“Is it...a bug?” asked Yogiri.

It was an enormous insect, a rhinoceros beetle big enough that one might mistake it for an elephant at first glance. It was five meters tall with six thick legs, a round body, and a magnificent horn on its head.

“Hey, do you really think elves live in a place like this?” Tomochika asked.

“How would I know?!” Mokomoko replied.

“It doesn’t look like it’s here for us,” Yogiri remarked.

“But how will it act now that it has seen us?” asked the ghost.

Yogiri frowned. “Beetles eat tree sap, right? Will it attack people?”

“There *are* carnivorous beetles out there.”

Right now, it wasn’t showing any clear killing intent. If they didn’t bother it, it seemed like it wouldn’t be a problem.

“Let’s get out of the way,” Yogiri suggested. “Actually, we can probably follow the path that it made through the forest.”

“We have no idea if that will lead us east,” Mokomoko pointed out.

The three of them stepped out of the way of the beetle. As if totally blind to them, it kept trekking forward. It then tried to kick another tree out of its way.

“Wait, that’s not a tree!” Tomochika shouted. “That’s another bug!”

“It looks similar to a walking stick.”

“It may not technically be an insect. It has too many legs,” their guardian spirit observed.

The creature camouflaged as a tree wrapped itself around the beetle, and roars from the combating insects split the air.

“What is going on?! What are we supposed to do if the bugs fight each other?!” cried Tomochika.

Yogiri shrugged. “I’m going to root for the beetle.”

“Stop watching and run!”

The giant beetle was twisting back and forth, trying to shake the other insect loose. The tree-like creature wriggled, trying to get its legs through the

gaps in the beetle's exoskeleton. So far, the beetle seemed to be losing, since its horn had been broken in the surprise attack. Yogiri kept watching, but the fight soon came to an abrupt end, as with a sudden gust of wind, the two bugs vanished.

"What now?!" asked Tomochika.

An enormous body had appeared in front of them, like a black wall materializing out of nowhere. Looking closer, it also appeared to be some sort of insect. Its unbelievably enormous body blocked their view.

"Is that...a centipede?" Yogiri asked.

The forest had been cut apart so much that they could now see the sky. The two warring insects from earlier were up in the air, both held in the enormous jaws of the new arrival. With a crunch, their bodies broke apart, falling to the ground in pieces.

"Mokomoko, weren't you proudly saying a little while ago that you exterminated giant centipedes?" Yogiri asked.

"Well...I can't say they were quite *this* large."

Mokomoko had said that in the past, things like demons, giant snakes, and giant centipedes had existed in Japan. She had boasted about how the Dannoura School could defeat such creatures, but it didn't seem like she had much to offer here.

"If it's that big, it probably won't even notice us."

"It's totally staring at us! It's definitely interested in us!" Tomochika protested.

The giant centipede had turned its head to face them, all but declaring that they were its next target.

"Die."

The enormous insect wavered and fell, crushing a huge section of forest beneath it. A tremor shook the ground, incomparable to any of the shaking they had felt earlier.

"What is this place?!" Tomochika shouted. "How is this an Elven Forest?!"

"It's a lot more dangerous than I thought it would be."

"Speaking of which," Mokomoko interrupted, "as hard as it is to admit, I fear we may be lost."

"Huh? Weren't we just walking in a straight line?"

"Such was my intent."

“Hold on, you were cutting a path through the leaves. It should be easy to tell if we were going straight.”

They turned to look behind them. The forest was in ruins. The movement of the giant insects had completely changed the landscape.

“We should be fine if we can see the sea, right? So if you go up into the sky and check—”

“This forest is filled with something like magical energy, or a curse, or a toxic miasma. I cannot move separately from you two.”

“Why didn’t you tell us that earlier?!”

“It’s getting dark,” Yogiri said, checking his watch. “The sun might set soon.” Sure enough, it was already evening.

“All right! That’s it for today!”

Taking a break wouldn’t solve anything, but they were going to end up camping anyway. Mokomoko used Furemaru to cut apart the surrounding area just in case before transforming the material into something like a tent.

The three stepped inside and sat down. The floor of the tent was like a cushion, so it was reasonably comfortable. There were no seams in the structure, so they were completely cut off from the outside.

“Wow, it’s cool in here. How are you doing that?” Tomochika asked.

“Furemaru can compress and expand the air, mimicking an air conditioner. Did you not learn of Boyle’s and Charles’s Laws in school?”

“Ugh...now a ghost from the Heian era is one-upping me in knowledge...”

“Can you do this while we’re moving?” Yogiri asked.

“Controlling it while in motion would be quite difficult.”

“Well, let’s talk about what we’re going to do tomorrow, including how we’ll deal with the heat.”

“Yeah,” Tomochika agreed. “I guess we’ve been a bit too haphazard about this.”

“Hm. At this point, we don’t know particularly well where we are,” Mokomoko replied.

“Can’t you at least tell which direction is which?” Tomochika asked. “Shouldn’t Enju have a function like that?”

“The robot has the ability to detect terrestrial magnetic fields, but they are different from what exists on Earth. So the function isn’t particularly useful. If we looked at the sun and stars, we might be able to use them as a reference.”

“We were too reckless. I wonder how Vivian and the others are planning on getting through?” asked Yogiri.

“I mean, they had a plan, so I imagine they have some idea, right?” Tomochika answered. “It seemed like they knew about the forest already.” Maanu had said they had sent someone to scout it out, and the elves hadn’t attacked them. So clearly, they had some knowledge of the forest itself.

“I see. I guess we’ll ask someone if we run into them.”

“Ask who? I doubt we’ll be able to meet up with Vivian again.”

“I think it’ll be fine. Apostles were attacking us up until we entered the forest, so they’ll probably keep coming. The real question is whether the bugs will get to them first.”

“So, we basically have no plan at all.”

Yogiri was forced to reflect on their reckless advance into the forest.

Chapter 16 — This Is Going to Be the New Member of the Four Heavenly Kings

Late at night, Shigeto Mitadera successfully managed to infiltrate the mansion where Rei Kushima was being held. It was all thanks to Hanakawa. His time spent hanging around the estates of the heads of the empire had them all on high alert, and that ended up pulling security away from the building where Rei was being held as the guards focused on protecting the rooms of their masters. Rei's location was being all but ignored.

"I'm impressed things are going so smoothly," he commented.

It is only one of a multitude of possible plans.

Since they were trying to be covert, Navi did not presently have her human appearance. Once again a book, she was sitting in Shigeto's pocket. With the information she provided, Shigeto could find the best way into the mansion easily and already knew all the guard patrol routes. Everything had been easy so far.

After the next guard passes, go to the staircase across from us and head up to the second floor.

"Okay."

Staying hidden, he followed Navi's instructions, making it up the stairs. Rei was supposedly in a room in the middle of the second floor, where she was being confined.

The door will be locked, so first we need to find the key.

The key was in the maids' waiting room. They needed one to bring her food and such.

"Shouldn't Rei be able to get through a locked door on her own?"

Rei's class, Femme Fatale, gave her the ability to entice men, but perhaps due to leveling up, it was also starting to have some effect on women like Rena. Shigeto figured it would be easy enough for her to subjugate a maid and escape using that power.

It is fundamentally a power meant to be used against the opposite sex. We

don't know the scope of her abilities now, so we can't really theorize on the particulars of it.

"Is it possible she can't move?"

It is. You will have to carry her in that case, but I have already planned a route for that eventuality.

Shigeto made it to the room. He had slipped through a gap in the guards' patrol, so there was no one to be seen. It didn't seem like they were trying particularly hard to keep her guarded.

He inserted the key, but the door wasn't even locked.

"Is she not inside?"

If she had been taken somewhere else, there was no need to lock the door. But there was light coming from inside the room, so there was a strong possibility that someone was in there.

"Maybe it's someone else?"

The only thing I know for sure is that this is where Rei was being held. The Master Oracle class doesn't have the ability to retrieve information in real time.

The Master Oracle's ability was not to give a perfect answer to any question. It simply looked at the future from a fixed point, reviewed potential futures, and suggested a course of action to deal with the possibilities.

"But it was an option you considered, right?"

Yes. If she is not here, she is likely in a different room, but in that case we should retreat for now. Switching to another route from here would be extremely difficult.

"Either way, we have to see what's inside."

It was too late to be getting cold feet. Shigeto opened the door.

"Who's there? It's awfully late for visitors."

Rei was sitting on her bed, reading a book. Shigeto was relieved to see she wasn't being treated poorly.

"It's me. I came to save you!"

"Oh, did I leave you under my control?"

Shigeto felt uneasy. He had come to save her, but their first meeting after such a long time had prompted a fairly weak response from her. It was almost as if she didn't care about him at all.

"I've got an escape route planned," he continued. "You just need to follow me."

“I’m not being held against my will, you know.”

“What are you saying?”

His heart suddenly began to race, and his breathing became ragged. A wave of dizziness dropped him to his knees. Confused, he looked up at Rei. She was positively glowing. He had always thought she was beautiful, but she seemed even more stunning than before.

“What?! This future shouldn’t be possible!”

Navi had manifested in human form. Taking hold of Shigeto, she was trying to drag him out of the room.

“Looks like you’ve made a cute little friend there,” Rei said. “Does that mean your power awakened?”

“Then you...”

“Yes, I’ve awakened too.”

They had no idea how Rei’s power had changed, but her awakening had been totally unforeseen by Navi, leaving her in mental disarray.

“Hold on... I came here to save you, so why—”

“I don’t want you taking me away from here, but convincing you seems like a pain.”

“Why? After you became their underling for me...” Shigeto thought she had done it to save him, so now it was his turn to save her.

“What? I thought I was about to be killed, so I figured I had to do something. You really interpreted that however you wanted, didn’t you? I guess that’s what happens when you fall for me.”

Shigeto’s mind fell into further chaos, unable to think about anything other than her.

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Hanakawa was in an empty white space.

“Yet another dream, I suppose. And it looks like I have returned to my female form?”

His transformation into a girl had been temporary. He was a little disappointed, but no one would recognize him in that form, which would result in him losing his position as jester, and he would be killed if he was discovered.

“If this is a dream, perhaps I can make a mirror appear... Oh, it worked.”

He looked exactly as he had before. “Then I should... Hmm. Is this manner of speech still appropriate? Putting that aside, if what Malnarilna said is true, then I have been called to give someone advice.”

He looked around. Empty white space expanded in every direction with a single black speck in the distance. It appeared something was over there.

“Since this is a dream, can I fly? Oh, it looks like I can.”

His body floated up into the air, and he began flying towards the speck. He found a boy in a school uniform standing there. His age seemed to be similar to Hanakawa’s.

“Hmm. He seems like quite the gloomy fellow. Like the kind of guy to get absorbed in otherworld fantasy novels to escape reality.”

“Oh! A goddess?! You must be a goddess, right?! Am I being reincarnated in another world?! That must be it!”

“How does someone so cowardly in front of their own classmates act so arrogantly in front of a total stranger?” Hanakawa muttered under his breath.

“Did you say something?”

“No, not at all. I’m... Ahem, I am a messenger from God! Oho ho ho!”

“Ohhh! So before I get sent over, you’re here to explain things to me, to soften the blow, right?!”

“P-Precisely!”

Hmm. I didn’t decide on a character beforehand...but I will probably never see this guy again, so I can just wing it. Now then, I suppose I am meant to give him some advice on choosing a new power.

We’ll leave the explanation to you!

Just as he was wondering what to do next, he heard Malnarilna’s voice. At the same time, details about the process of giving out powers flowed into his head.

“Indeed!” Hanakawa continued aloud. “Upon reincarnating, you will be granted a new power, but there are some conditions! You are being summoned to defeat the villain Yogiri Takatou! Naturally, if you refuse to engage him, your power will disappear!”

“So I’m being summoned to fight a Demon Lord, huh? Classic!”

“You will be permitted to select your own power, but Yogiri Takatou possesses the ability to inflict instant death, so please take that into consideration.”

“Oh? What kind of powers can I pick?”

“Uhh, well...” Hanakawa didn’t really know what kind of powers were okay. For example, it was likely impossible for the boy to ask for a power that made him stronger than Malnarilna. There was clearly going to be some sort of limit.

Oh, we didn’t explain that, did we? No matter how amazing we are as gods, the powers we can give out are based on the person.

So just think about something that matches his fate score!

Fate score, is it? I seem to remember the Sage Miss Aoi saying something similar. Well, how is this young man’s fate score?

Terrible.

Totally mediocre.

But he died in a weird way, so he got a bit of a bonus!

Aha ha...so that is why people transported to other worlds die in such strange ways...

Leaving out how poor the boy’s fate score was and thus how weak his ability would have to be, Hanakawa moved right along with his explanation.

“Please choose something under one thousand skill points! Here is the skill list! Please try and think of something that could defeat Yogiri Takatou! His abilities are to detect killing intent and inflict instant death at will, so think carefully...”

“I’ve already decided. All stats times ten thousand! A simple power like that is easier to use than any of these complicated ones. There won’t be any catch like, ‘You can’t control yourself at ten thousand times strength,’ right?”

Information about the skill immediately appeared in the back of Hanakawa’s mind. One would think that if a person suddenly moved at ten thousand times their normal speed, it would be impossible for them to control themselves, but since the speed of his thoughts and reflexes would be multiplied by the same amount, it seemed like it would work just fine.

“That should be no problem. But did you hear what I said? Such a power would never be able to defeat—”

“If I move at ten thousand times speed and hit him with a punch at ten thousand times strength, he’ll die, right?”

“As I thought!” He wasn’t listening at all. Hanakawa decided to leave it there. He didn’t really care about this guy one way or another, and it wouldn’t affect him personally if the boy was killed.

“So, am I going to start as a baby?”

“Well...if we did that, it would take quite some time before you were able to combat Yogiri Takatou...so we will have you appear as a mysterious stranger, suddenly visiting this world. Is that acceptable?”

Hanakawa gave Malnarilna’s explanation to the boy directly. Although they said it was a reincarnation, it was more like a summoning. The only difference was that, unlike an actual summoning, he had died in his previous world, so a new body was being prepared for him.

“Starting over as a baby sounds like a pain, so that’s fine,” the boy responded.

Having acquired his acceptance, Hanakawa explained the rules of being an apostle briefly before sending him off.

“Is that good enough? I am not sure having them select their own powers is wise. I feel like it would be preferable for you to select the power for them.”

That was just a test!

Next time it will be a much better person, so they’ll have lots more choices!

“I hope it is someone who will actually listen to what I say...” Hanakawa felt like his role of giving advice wasn’t actually all that meaningful.

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The person with the ability to multiply all stats by ten thousand was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

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“So, this is going to be the new member of the Four Heavenly Kings.”

Hanakawa felt a cold sweat running down his back. They were in the audience chamber of the palace. Shigeto Mitadera and Rei Kushima were standing in front of them. Yoshifumi was sitting on his throne with Hanakawa standing beside him. One level down were Rena, Luna, and Abby. The new member of the Four Heavenly Kings, Rei, knelt there with her subordinate, Shigeto.

I’m not going to be outed as a traitor, am I? Hanakawa had met secretly with Shigeto and cooperated with him. If someone pointed that out, his

position would be in danger.

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“I know Yoshifumi’s decisions are final, so I can’t argue with it or anything, but is she going to be all that useful?” Luna asked, doubt clear in her voice. It seemed she had plenty of desire to argue.

“Well, we’re back to four for now. She is a little strong, at least. Also, Rei’s subordinate here is a Master Oracle. When I asked why they came to this island, they told me somethin’ interesting.”

At this rate, it appears the discussion will have nothing to do with me? Hanakawa felt a little relieved.

“Apparently, there’s a way to beat the Sages.”

“What?!” Rena, Luna, and Abby were plainly shocked.

“We’re not invincible or anythin’. Sometimes Sages die to Aggressors. But according to this guy, there’s a much more certain way. Something that will let you almost always beat a Sage if you have it.”

“What on Earth...”

“Abby, this is kinda related to your work. Those guys from the royal family went to the Elven Forest, yeah?”

“Yes. Adventurers were sent to deal with them, but... No way, is there something there?”

“If they wanted to get over here, there’s no reason to go through the Elven Forest. But they did, so they must have a goal.”

“I see,” Hanakawa interjected. “So this is about the World Sword Omega Blade, is it?”

“Huh? You know about it?” Yoshifumi asked.

“I heard about it from Sir Mitadera earlier.”

“Right, you came here with Rei. Well, that’s right. Apparently, if you have that sword, you can kill Sages. I’m not sure it’ll work against someone invincible like me, but it’s probably not good to ignore it. I’ve decided to go deal with it myself.”

“Do you really need to bother yourself over something like that?” Luna asked. “Why not just send Rena or something?” Luna’s role was to oversee the city, while Abby was in charge of the adventurer system. Rena was comparatively more free to act than the rest of them.

“A sword that can beat the Sages sounds interesting, doesn’t it?”

Yoshifumi’s intention in creating his empire was to manage his boredom. He had let the royal family survive because he felt like they might do something interesting if left alive. The adventurer system and hostile

environment of West Ent were all just ways for him to kill time. So if there was a sword that could destroy Sages out there, it might prove to be a stimulating experience.

"I get the feeling it'll be nothing, though. Rena, Rei, Hanakawa, and...Shigeto? You're coming with me."

"Me as well?!" Hanakawa sputtered. "I find it hard to believe I will be of much value!"

"You're there to keep me from getting bored. Make sure you entertain me."

"Urgh... Well, the Elven Forest, is it? Perhaps I will be presented with a selection of beautiful elves for myself. As a retainer of the emperor, it is not out of the question to have one or two elves serve me..."

Pushing down the numerous awful premonitions in his head, he tried to think positively.

Chapter 17 — You're Going to Let Something like This Happen Just for That?!

The first morning after camping in the Elven Forest, Yogiri and Tomochika finished their preparations for the day and began trying to determine which direction to proceed in.

Hm. It seems I can at least pop my head up a bit above the canopy, Mokomoko said. *I looked to see if there was anything we could use as a landmark and found a number of particularly large trees. If we head for them, we should be able to keep a straight course.*

She floated back down in her ghost form. The Elven Forest was a particularly harsh environment for spirits, so she had gone to check just how far she could get.

"Why is it so dangerous for you to split up from me anyway?" Tomochika asked.

Normally, maintaining a spiritual form is extremely dangerous. Without careful attention it will disperse, so keeping a persistent form requires significant focus.

"What does 'focus' even mean for a spirit?"

There are any number of names for it, like malice, attachment, or grudge. In my case, I persist due to my identity as the guardian spirit of the Dannoura household. If I distance myself too much from you, it makes one wonder why I haven't passed on to the next life. Normally, a short distance would be no problem, but this forest is particularly thick with chaotic magic. If I go too far, I could lose sight of you.

As she spoke, Mokomoko re-entered the Enju robot. She could control the machine from a distance, but it was easier if she was inside it.

"Was there really a tree that big?" Yogiri couldn't remember seeing any that large since they entered the forest. He would have thought a tree big enough to use as a landmark would have been noticeable from the outside.

"This forest has a somewhat unique environment," Mokomoko explained.

“It is almost as if it is halfway displaced into another world. You cannot perceive the interior from the exterior.”

“Huh, really?”

“And we just waltzed in without thinking?” asked Tomochika.

“I guess we were a bit too reckless yesterday. We’ll have to be more careful today.”

“Yeah. It was so hot yesterday, I lost track of what was going on...”

They had been so careless, sure that things would go well simply because they were safe from attack. Yogiri regretted not stopping to think the situation through more clearly.

“By the way, it seems like another apostle came around during the night,” he mentioned.

“I didn’t notice.”

“They attacked from really far away, so I couldn’t ask them anything.”

He had responded reflexively to the distant killing intent, so whoever it was had been killed before he could learn anything from them. The tent made from Furemaru was resilient enough to stop weaker attacks, so if Yogiri had felt killing intent, it meant it was an attack strong enough to punch through the tent and injure him directly. It was unlikely to have been a wild animal.

“I was really hoping someone we could talk to would show up.”

“Speaking of which, maybe we could find an elf that understands us?”

“Huh? Oh. Yeah, that could work,” he replied with a halfhearted smile.

“What kind of reaction is that? There might still be elves here.”

“If an elf showed up, it would probably attack us. And if that happens, I’ll have to kill them.”

“Well, let’s just wait and see. I might be able to take one down without killing them. If it’s an archery contest, leave it to me!”

“I find it doubtful that any people living in this environment would rely on the bow as a primary weapon,” Mokomoko commented.

For some reason, Tomochika had decided that elves used bows. However, line of sight was so poor in the forest, it was almost impossible to draw a straight line for any significant distance. Even a novice like Yogiri could tell that using a bow would be difficult here.

“Then maybe they use magic. They are elves, after all.”

“That seems far more likely. The air is thick with magical energy, so I imagine magic used here is more powerful than normal.”

“I still don’t know exactly what magic is in this world,” Yogiri said. Since coming there, they had witnessed many types of magic. But the style, scale, power, and method were different for each person, so he wasn’t really sure what the rules were.

“Anyway, let’s go!”

Every once in a while, Mokomoko would float up and look above the trees to ensure they were heading in the correct direction. Using her information, they altered their course on the go. As for the heat, part of that could be managed simply by being mentally prepared, in addition to taking plenty of breaks throughout the day. Aside from not really knowing where they were going, things were moving much smoother than they had the day before.

“Hm. It appears something is ahead of us,” Mokomoko said, bringing Enju to a halt.

“I don’t feel any killing intent.”

“It is heading towards us.”

When they stopped to listen, they could hear the sound of something passing through the foliage, getting closer.

“Hey, is someone out there?” Yogiri called in a loud voice.

There was no response except for something like a moan.

“Was that...human?”

“It sounds like it.”

As they stood and waited, a person appeared. Perhaps they were an adventurer, as they were clad in leather armor. But their skin was purple, and their whole body had swollen up to the point that moving at all seemed difficult. It was definitely a human, but they had been so disfigured it was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman. It continued to moan as it stumbled forward, with no perceivable intellect behind its voice.

“What is that? Is this another zombie?!” Tomochika cried.

It didn’t seem like it had appeared to attack them, as the adventurer collapsed to the ground. Its body was still transforming, and now it had lost the ability to walk.

“What do we do?” Tomochika asked. “Should we help?”

“It looks like we’re way too late for that.”

“Yeah, I don’t want to get close.”

Then the collapsed body exploded. The swollen parts burst one after

another.

"This is bad!" Mokomoko declared.

The swollen bits must have been something like pustules. As they burst, they splattered pus everywhere.

"Dannoura, stay beside me."

"What is it?"

"I don't know, but it's deadly."

As the fluid sprayed out, the plants it touched suddenly changed color and also began to swell.

"It appears to be some sort of virus," Mokomoko observed.

"That seems kind of dangerous!"

"Don't worry. Anything that tries to hurt us will die automatically. But it could be bad if we leave it like this."

It appeared to be contagious to any other form of life. One after another, trees collapsed, and the birds and insects flitting through the air fell soon after. And they were spreading whatever it was, expanding its range of influence. The contagion had started with the adventurer but was now growing at an accelerating pace.

"What do we do?!"

"If it's a virus, I can just kill it, but this is kind of convenient, isn't it?"

"How?!"

"If the forest is destroyed, it'll be easier for us to walk."

"You're going to let something like this happen just for that?!"

Yogiri could have killed the trees that stood in their way, and that would have made them easier to destroy, but since their remains would still be there, it didn't change that they would be in the way. Whatever this was, it was decomposing any living thing it came into contact with. As far as making a path to walk, it was far more useful than Yogiri's power.

"If this was caused by another apostle, how far do you think it'll go?" he asked. "I don't want to think they'd go so far as to destroy the whole world."

The trees fell to the ground and crumbled, leaving bare earth. The destruction spread for a few hundred meters around them before they noticed a person in the distance.

"Is that an apostle? I'd like to restrain them somehow if we can."

"Very well, I will try," Mokomoko said as Enju.

Furemaru extended from the robot's right hand to pick up a small stone

from the ground. The black substance then expanded and transformed, becoming like an extended arm before being used to hurl the stone at the distant figure. Even a plain stone had some power behind it when thrown from an arm a few meters long. It struck the distant figure head-on, and they collapsed with a cry.

"Hey! What if that person had nothing to do with it?!" Tomochika said.

"Then I'll apologize."

"That's all?"

Walking over the ground covered in the fused mess of decomposed biomatter, they made it to the figure they had struck. The rock had hit his leg, and the man was holding it in pain.

"Are you an apostle?" Yogiri said, stepping up beside him.

"Y-You... Why aren't you dead?"

"If you're targeting me, I guess that means yes. How did you get here? Do you know how to get out?" The man was silent. "You know that I'm Yogiri Takatou, and what my power is, right? If you don't tell us anything, I'll kill you."

"And if I do tell you, will you let me go?"

"As long as you don't attack us again."

The man hesitated a moment before responding. "Apostles have the ability to teleport to where you are. That's how I got here. I don't know how to get out."

"Oh, come on..."

Things had gotten worse. Yogiri had thought it was weird that they were being attacked so regularly, but if the apostles were simply teleporting to him, that explained it.

"You know you can't kill me, right? If you don't stop that thing, it'll destroy the whole forest, so could you..."

"Yeah, I'll stop—"

Sensing killing intent, Yogiri jumped backwards. The man vanished. The spot where the two of them had been a moment prior had been replaced with a hole. An empty space one meter across had appeared in the ground, as if the earth had been punched through.

"Huh? What happened?!" Tomochika cried.

"I have no idea. Maybe some power to make holes? It looks like there's another apostle nearby."

If things were going to continue like this, stopping to talk to every attacker didn't seem like it was going to be very helpful.

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The person with the massacre virus ability was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

The person with the ability to create trap holes was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

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"Hmm...as I thought, still not good enough," Hanakawa muttered.

The massacre virus, as its name suggested, was the ability to create a virus that killed anything it infected. Secondary effects included making the user immune to it, allowing the user to control how long it took for those infected to die, and the ability to control the activity of the virus within a one-kilometer radius. He had thought that if one just made a virus, that would be indirect enough to avoid being killed by Yogiri. At least, that was the advice he had given, but it seemed it was pointless, as the virus itself was ineffective against him.

He had thought the trap hole power might work because it only created a hole, and thus it was possible that Yogiri wouldn't be able to detect it. But he had avoided the first attack, so he did in fact seem to perceive it as killing intent. The second attack had been to create a hole one kilometer wide, but the user had been killed before they could activate it. In short, if the attack would inevitably lead to Yogiri's death, it couldn't even be activated.

"This truly feels like an impossible game. I would appreciate it if Malnarilna stopped playing around and helped out."

But for pride or some other reason, they refused to get directly involved. In the end, it seemed they weren't all that serious about it. As absolute beings like gods, they were content to play with mortals like game pieces.

"What are you mumbling about?" Yoshifumi asked.

"Nothing at all!"

The Sage and his retinue were traveling in a gold- and jewel-encrusted vehicle. It was constructed in levels, with Yoshifumi's throne at the highest

point. On the lower levels were seats for his retainers. With no seat prepared for him, Hanakawa was forced to stand beside the emperor's throne.

This looks like a display case for dolls.

But Yoshifumi had designed it to be a palanquin. Despite how much it must have weighed, it only moved because it was being carried by a crowd of people underneath.

"But isn't this incredibly inefficient?" Hanakawa asked.

The palanquin moved slowly through the streets of the capital. At this rate, it would take a long while for them to reach the Elven Forest.

"If I were only worried about efficiency, everything would be over instantly," Yoshifumi responded. "You have to take your time in life, don't you think?"

"Speaking of which, didn't you sneak out to visit the adventurers' bar before? Are you not worried about announcing yourself publicly like this?"

If his face was known by the people, there was little point in sneaking out into the city. Asking people to pretend like they didn't know him would be absurd.

"Not at all. If any of them see my face, they'll be executed."

"Huh? Ah, I see."

The people in the streets were all bowed low to the ground. Not a single one of them looked up.

No, no, no! Why would you execute people for seeing you when you are making such a show of coming out in public?!

Both gods and Sages seemed completely free to do as they pleased with their overwhelming power. Perhaps a bit late, Hanakawa decided that being transported to a world like this was no fun at all.

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The landscape around them for several kilometers had been reduced to a barren wasteland. Though it opened their field of view considerably, at this rate the entire forest would be wiped out. They had thought the death of the power's user would stop the destruction, but it didn't seem like it was slowing down, so Yogiri had to do it himself.

"That's way too big!" he cried.

Now that their field of view was clear, he could see the enormous tree

they were heading towards. It was larger than the other trees of the forest by an order of magnitude. With nothing to compare it to, it was hard to gauge, but it seemed to be at least a few kilometers tall, making it clearly abnormal.

"Traveling sure has become easier."

There was no way they could get lost now. No more apostles appeared to attack them either, allowing them to reach their destination without further incident.

"But this is... Huh. Strangely sad, I guess?"

"Indeed," Mokomoko agreed. "For its size, its presence seems remarkably thin."

"I think it's dead. I'm probably the one who killed it."

"Why?!" Tomochika blurted out.

"This was also an Izelda. When I killed them all, this was part of him."

"This is a plant though, right? How long had that Izelda guy been working on his plan?" They didn't know how long it took trees to grow in this world, but it likely took a considerable amount of time to reach this size. She wouldn't have been surprised to find out it was a few hundred years old.

"Let us try climbing this," Mokomoko suggested. "We should be able to see quite far from that height."

"If you can't see the inside of the forest from outside, are we sure we can see outside the forest from here?" asked Yogiri.

"I think we have a bigger problem than that," Tomochika replied. "Can we even climb this thing?"

"I guess we can't just casually pull ourselves up."

The bark of the tree was fairly rough and uneven, so there were any number of handholds. But the size of the tree itself would make climbing difficult. Even a little bit of climbing would soon exhaust their stamina.

"What do we do, then?"

"I guess there is no other option," Mokomoko said. "I will have to carry you."

"Oh, so we're going with that pathetic scene anyway," Tomochika remarked.

"What are you saying? Of course I will be carrying you as well. That will be much faster." A black shadow extended from Enju's body. It became numerous enormous talons that dug into the earth, lifting Enju up into the air. She looked like some sort of enormous spider.

“What is that?!”

“Climb on.” Enju turned to show her back. Something like a stepladder had been created there for them to stand and hold on to.

“All right.” Yogiri climbed onto Enju’s back, and with a little hesitation, Tomochika did the same.

“Here we go.”

The enormous claws made from Furemaru bit into the tree, lifting them higher. The way the claws moved one after another made it look like they were crawling up the tree.

“This is kind of fast. If you can do things like this, you should use it more often,” Yogiri said.

“Movement like this consumes a large amount of energy. I cannot use it regularly. Being unable to use Furemaru in an emergency would be too dangerous.”

After climbing for a while, they reached some large branches. Deciding that was high enough for them to look around, Yogiri stepped onto a branch.

“Well...this is kind of a problem,” he announced, looking around.

“Indeed. I said it was like another world, but...”

A bizarre sight greeted them. The forest around them continued into the distance, as far as the eye could see.

Chapter 18 — Don’t Burn Down the Elven Forest! What Kind of Villain Are You?!

Yogiri, Tomochika, and Mokomoko surveyed the landscape in every direction. No matter where they looked, the brush seemed to continue on forever. The Elven Forest was on the southern end of West Ent, which should have bordered the sea, but there was no water in sight.

“Nothing but trees, huh?” Yogiri commented.

“Are we even going to be able to get out of here?” Tomochika asked.

“Maanu said that people came here to scout it out, so you should be able to go in and out. Probably.”

“‘Probably’? I can’t help but feel like it looks hopeless.”

“We have no choice but to find a way,” Mokomoko said. “For now, let us select a new objective.”

They needed to find a new location to head to. Yogiri looked around carefully. Though there were nothing but trees around them, there were some things that stood out, like other enormous trees similar to the one they had climbed. There seemed to be five more, making six giant trees total.

“They’re laid out in a hexagon,” he observed.

“Hm. Now that you mention it, these enormous trees are clearly different, so there may have been a purpose to their placement. Maybe it is a little cliché, but perhaps they are arranged as a six-pointed star? It is possible they were needed for some sort of ritual.”

“In that case, maybe there is something...yeah, right in the middle.”

In the center of the shape made by the six giant trees was a space devoid of plant life, replaced by an array of stone structures, built up in levels like pyramids.

“Hm...it seems reminiscent of Teotihuacán,” Mokomoko said.

“Is it a city? Maybe that’s where the elves live?”

“Weren’t the elves you were imagining the kind that lived in harmony with nature, like fairies who love the forest?” Yogiri asked. He couldn’t help but feel that living in stone structures conflicted with that image.

“Stone is a part of nature as well, isn’t it?!”

“That seems like it’s pushing it to me.”

“Hm. I thought it unreasonable for the forest to continue forever,” Mokomoko interjected, “but now that I look more closely, I can see similar places here and there.”

“Meaning what?”

“In short, those two places may be one and the same. Space has been warped to make the forest seem immense, but in truth it may not be that large.”

They looked to where Enju was pointing. The two points looked exactly the same. In fact, the entire forest looked like a mosaic of a single repeating pattern.

“So something like the Lost Woods?” Yogiri said. “Where there’s a fixed route you have to take to travel through it, and it makes a chime to tell you that you’re going the right way?”

“Possibly, but how do we find the correct path?” Mokomoko wondered aloud.

Even taking into account the fact that space was warped here, the layout of the forest was rather complex. It didn’t seem like something they could get a grasp on just by looking around from where they stood.

“Why don’t we head to the center?” Yogiri suggested. At a glance, it didn’t seem like the section at the center of the six trees was being duplicated. Only the area outside that hexagon was repeating.

“So, maybe the Lost Woods part is just outside the hexagon, and we were able to get this far because the forest was destroyed?” asked Tomochika.

Once the area had been reduced to a barren wasteland, they could make out the enormous tree. They had made it there just by heading straight for it.

“Perhaps. If space is truly warped, reaching that far would be difficult. It may be a technique that depends on the forest itself.”

“So as a last resort, we can just burn down the entire forest?”

“Don’t burn down the Elven Forest!” Tomochika shouted. “What kind of villain are you?!” Clearly, she was opposed to that plan.

“Well, for now, nothing stands out except for those stone structures, so I

guess we should head there." He could always kill the entire forest, but that really was a last resort. He had no idea what sort of ramifications that would have, so he wanted to avoid that, if possible.

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Insect-repelling incense and a bell of guidance. These were the tools necessary to traverse the Elven Forest—treasures passed down by the royal family. Of course, they did nothing to stop the attacks of the elves. The reason the family could never obtain the legendary sword hidden within the depths of the forest was because of the elves' interference. The threat they posed in the forest was overwhelming. It was virtually impossible for ordinary humans to make it through a territory that favored the enemy in every way.

But now, the elves offered no obstacle. The denizens of the forest who usually attacked anyone the moment they stepped foot inside were nowhere to be seen. For that reason, the royal family and their subordinates were able to make relatively steady progress. Gathering in front of the forest, they entered as a single group. The bell of guidance led them through by way of one of the few paths, taking them to the ruins they sought.

Despite being a group of thirty, they were able to move easily. Maanu led the way with the bell, with the members of the royal family behind her. To their left and right were spread other followers, carrying large amounts of supplies for the expectedly long journey.

"This is way too easy," Vivian all but pouted. The elves didn't attack, and the insects kept their distance. Even the abnormal climate was held at bay by magical barriers.

"Don't let your guard down, Vivian. Don't forget that we've never been able to make it this far," First Prince Edward warned her.

"Why must we all come to a place like this?! Vivian was the only one who was discovered!" complained the first princess, Matilda.

"We only have one set of tools to get through the forest. Did you want us to leave you behind?" the second prince, Joseph, answered her.

"If you just sat around and did nothing while we reclaimed the kingdom, there wouldn't be a place in it for you after we finished," the third prince, James, added, a tinge of irritation in his voice.

Vivian was the second princess, the youngest of five. They were the only remaining members of the royal bloodline and had been hiding, scattered across West Ent.

“Well, if anything attacks us, I will stop them with my shield!”

“I wonder what made Lord Malnarilna bless her, of all people...” Matilda said, giving Vivian a suspicious look.

The young woman had demonstrated her shield powers for everyone. Though she had been seen as the most useless of the five, the blessing had afforded her a better position among them. She didn’t, however, explain that the power was for the sake of killing Yogiri Takatou, nor did she mention the details of being an apostle. It was a problem too far removed from their current situation, so she didn’t want to complicate things.

“We’re here.”

The thick brush vanished. Paving stones covering the ground in front of them. A number of buildings of layered stone filled the clearing. These were the ruins they had been heading for. It was said that this was where the royal family had begun, but as their history was over a thousand years old, they couldn’t confirm the truth of it. Since tools had been passed down by the royal family specifically for reaching this place, however, it couldn’t have been totally unrelated to them.

They all stepped onto the stone pavement. The air seemed to change a little. They had been traveling through a hot and humid forest, but now a dry wind blew by them. Lining up, they entered the collection of ruins.

“So, where is our objective?” James asked.

“The bell of guidance is still leading us forward. It’s probably in the largest building, right there,” Edward answered. They were now walking down a large road leading through the ruins. Ahead of them lay a large, triangular structure. They didn’t know why the ruins had been built, but that structure was clearly the center of them.

“Should we perhaps set up a base of operations first? Or are we just going to head straight in?” Matilda asked, betraying her exhaustion.

“Good idea. Let’s find a decent building we can use.” They had been walking for quite a while. Edward stopped the procession, deciding it was time for a break.

And then Vivian went flying.

“Huh?” Striking something, she fell to land face-first on the ground, still

unaware of what had happened. Lifting her head up, she saw a stone giant. It appeared she had been kicked by it, but she had no idea where it had come from.

"Enemies! The buildings are moving!" Vivian's retainer, Gale, shouted.

More than half of the procession was already dead. The ex-royal guards had been able to respond to the giants' attack, but the noncombatants like those carrying supplies and the barrier mages had no way of dodging, nor could they survive the hits.

"Why did you let them hit me, Gale?! You're supposed to be *my* retainer!" Vivian shouted. Gale had jumped clear, holding Matilda in his arms. The rest of the royal family was being protected by their various subordinates.

"Because you're invincible!" Maanu shouted back angrily, still alive. "You should be able to figure that out yourself!"

While Vivian wasn't injured in the slightest and didn't even feel any pain, she couldn't help but be unhappy about their careless treatment of her. She gave a short cry, startled by the sudden movement of the building behind her, finally realizing that the structure itself had been what had impacted her. The building transformed, taking the shape of a person. Vivian hurried back to the group in a panic as stone giants began to surround them.

"I-I have to bring them back to life!" She remembered that she had the power of Shield Resurrection, but the bodies were scattered all about and completely mangled. The light of her power didn't reach that far, and she didn't know if it would work on someone who was that disfigured.

"Idiot! Run!" Maanu ran up and grabbed Vivian's hand. Gale swung his sword in an attempt to drive back the stone giants, but even the techniques of a Heavenly Blade didn't seem to have much effect on them. The slashes which should have had no problem slicing apart solid rock glanced harmlessly off them.

The stone giants pressed in, ignoring the attacks against them. Vivian shook off Maanu's hand and jumped forward.

"Counter Shield!"

Holding a shield in both hands, she charged one of the giants. The giant was thrown backwards by her attack, but all she had accomplished was to knock it over, and it immediately rose back to its feet.

"Boomerang Chainsaw Shield!"

One after another, Vivian created and threw shields at them, but the chainsaws couldn't even scratch the surface of the creatures, let alone cut through them.

"Retreat! Back into the forest!" Edward shouted.

Everyone sprinted back to the cover of the trees, Vivian following behind them. Leaving the stone pavement behind, they made it into the forest, the stone giants making no effort to pursue them. After they had retreated a safe distance, the giants returned to their original forms as buildings.

"So this is all that survived?" Edward said bitterly. The five members of the royal family had all made it through, but almost all of their followers had been sacrificed to accomplish that.

"Dammit! What the hell was that?! No one told us about this!"

"Guardians of the ruins, I suppose."

"What are we supposed to do about them?!"

"Uh, if I go by myself, I might be able to do it?" Vivian suggested. "Their attacks don't work on me, so if I go calmly and carefully—"

"And what do you think you can do by yourself?" Maanu asked with an exasperated sigh. She didn't trust Vivian at all.

"I'll go with her," Gale offered. "If we focus on evasion, we should be able to make it through." Their attacks wouldn't work on the giants anyway, so that would probably be the best strategy.

"Better than sending her alone, I guess."

"No, I don't believe that is a good idea," Matilda replied. "The person who releases the seal on the World Sword becomes its master. That would end up putting our trump card in Vivian's hands." The reason the five remaining members of the royal family had journeyed there was the legend stating that royal blood was needed to reach the World Sword. Vivian had only been brought along as a bit of extra insurance. No one really wanted to leave the sword in her hands.

"But in this situation..."

"Vivian may have been given that blessing because God foresaw this happening."

"Is there no other way?" Although clearly pessimistic, the three princes seemed to feel that leaving it to Vivian was their only option.

"Well, let's rest first," Maanu said. They had run at a full sprint, so they weren't in any shape to be going back in.

“I’m not that tired,” Vivian protested, freezing as she turned to ask what Gale thought. But before she could say another word, his head dropped to the ground in front of her.

As they stared in shock, Edward, Joseph, and James all met the same fate. Maanu leaped forward, slashing down with her Morning Star. Their attacker leaped backwards, dodging the strike.

“Don’t just stand there! You’re invincible, aren’t you?!” Maanu shouted.

“What? Oh, right!” Vivian jumped in front of Matilda to protect her.

The attacker was a woman Vivian had never met. Holding a blood-soaked blade casually in one hand, she seemed fairly unmotivated.

“I thought things would be easy if I took out the guy who looked strongest first, but I guess I was wrong,” she commented.

“Who... Who are you?!” Vivian demanded.

“This is... I’ve seen her. She’s an adventurer. If I recall, the hero, Kris.”

Vivian wasn’t familiar with adventurers, so the name Maanu mentioned didn’t mean much to her. But she did recognize that the assailant was an apostle like her.

“Why is an apostle doing this?!”

“I mean, there’s no reason I can’t do my work as an apostle and as an adventurer at the same time, right? As an apostle, I need to work hard to kill Yogiri Takatou, but as an adventurer, I should be taking the really rewarding quests, don’t you think?”

Kris carried the heads of the three princes in one hand, holding them by the hair. She must have retrieved them from the ground at some point, although Vivian had no idea when or how.

“Give them back!”

“Good point. I can get any reward I want with just one, so there’s no point in carrying all three with me.”

As she spoke, Kris tossed two of the heads to the ground. When Vivian rushed forward to grab them, she used the opening to vanish back into the forest.

“Nooooo! Edward!” the stunned Matilda finally began to wail.

Chapter 19 — Is There Some Rule Where You Have to Come Out Saying “Good Grief”?!

Yogiri, Tomochika, and Mokomoko descended from the enormous tree on a glider built from Furemaru. They flew as far as they could manage, landing somewhere in the middle of the forest. They had made it quite a distance, but the center of the shape made from the six enormous trees was still far away.

“Good grief. This is such a pain, and I don’t really want to work in the first place.”

After walking for a while, they heard the voice of a young man as he appeared from the foliage.

“But we can’t just refuse a request from God.”

“Exactly! We’re talking about a villain who kills everyone they meet! If you don’t do something about it, the damage will just spread, Hiroaki!”

“You can just take him out like always!”

He had three girls with him. They had referred to Yogiri as a villain, so that probably made them apostles. That seemed to be how this god was referring to him.

“Just in case, can I ask how you got here?” Yogiri said.

“Sure. I can teleport anywhere. Nowhere is off limits. I don’t really want to do this either, but a promise is a promise. So let’s get this over with so we can head back and get some lunch.”

The girls hurriedly stepped away from the boy named Hiroaki as he began to glow with an intense light, forcing Yogiri to cover his eyes. The light didn’t seem to be an attack, judging from the lack of any killing intent. It soon faded, revealing that Hiroaki was now clad in golden armor. It was way too flashy.

“Now that I’ve got my armor on, your instant death ability won’t work on me.” In the next moment, Hiroaki vanished. “What? I had my hopes up since

I heard you were strong, but I could have easily killed you a hundred times over by now."

Yogiri turned at the voice coming from behind him, finding Hiroaki standing there. He was looking down at Yogiri, as if somehow disappointed in him.

"Don't ask me," Yogiri replied. "I can't even keep up with Dannoura's movements." His physical abilities were nothing spectacular, so he had no chance of keeping up with the kind of people this world produced.

"What a letdown. If you're this weak, I shouldn't have even bothered."

"He's really giving it to you, isn't he, Takatou?" Tomochika commented.

"Well, there's not much I can do about it," Yogiri answered.

The stranger vanished again. Guessing he was behind him once more, Yogiri turned to find the boy had moved a short distance away.

"Come forth!" the boy shouted. At his cry, an explosion resounded from the sky above them, prompting Yogiri to look up. It was hard to see anything through the forest canopy, but something above them was giving off a tangible pressure. It then descended, smashing through the trees in its path.

"Looks like a robot!"

"Hm. It seems to be a Universal Century type," Mokomoko observed.

It was an enormous robot. Equipped with a beam sword and rifle, the fantastical machine stared down at them.

"I'll kill you with this." As if responding to the boy's words, the robot leveled its rifle at Yogiri.

"Die."

With a loud noise, the robot fell to the ground.

"What?!"

"You die too."

Hiroaki collapsed. If he could teleport, there was a chance he could have taken them directly to the capital, but if he was going to aim killing intent at them, then Yogiri didn't have a choice.

"Huh?"

"Uhh...?"

"What?"

The three girls stared, mouths agape.

"So, what are you guys going to do?" Yogiri asked.

"Hold on. Hiroaki? Stop messing around!"

“Exactly! This is too much for a joke!”

“Hurry up and stand up!”

The girls ran forward to shake the fallen boy’s body. It didn’t seem to occur to them that he was dead.

“All right, let’s go,” Yogiri said, turning to leave.

“We’re just going to leave them here?!”

“Why should I care about some people who randomly showed up?”

“Getting involved with them does seem like a nuisance,” Mokomoko agreed.

The three of them continued on their way. The forest was dangerous, but if the girls had gone out of their way to come out there, they should have been strong enough to take care of themselves. And even if they weren’t, Yogiri had no obligation to take care of them.

“Good grief... To send such an old, worn out man as myself, this god is truly rough with their subjects...”

An old man appeared next. His tattered robe and knotted wooden staff gave the impression of a wizened old wizard.

“Die.”

“We’re not even questioning them anymore?!”

“I can’t help it; he was going to attack us.”

“We didn’t even get to hear who he was or what he could do!”

The old man must have been an apostle. It seemed Malnarilna’s plan was to just keep sending more of them after Yogiri, regardless of the consequences.

“It’s going to be annoying if they keep showing up like this,” Yogiri complained.

“I guess this is what it means for God to have his eye on you...”

“If he’d just show up himself, we could settle things a lot faster.”

Yogiri’s power couldn’t reach this god if all they did was send apostles after him. If he wasn’t worried about the fallout, he could have done something about it, but he couldn’t guarantee that people unrelated to the problem wouldn’t die as well and couldn’t justify going that far quite yet.

“There is nothing for us to do but climb over the corpses and continue!” Mokomoko brandished Furemaru, cutting her way deeper into the forest.

Since they were outside of the warped space, they were making reasonable progress towards the cluster of buildings they had seen earlier.

“Good grief. To think I, the Jet Black Witch, would be called to handle such a trifling matter.”

“Is there some rule that these people need to come out saying ‘Good grief’?!”

Matching the name she had given herself, the woman wore a black dress. Her long, beautiful hair likewise did nothing to ruin the look. Unlike the old man earlier, she had nothing in her hands. Apparently, she hadn’t brought anything with her.

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“I’ll ask just in case, but what do you want?” Yogiri said. “It’s getting kind of annoying with all the people showing up one after another.”

“I was told to kill you.”

“I think it’s kind of strange to happily kill someone just because you were told to.”

“I suppose. I have no particular reason to take your life either.”

“Then could you give it up?”

“I see. Very well.” Saying that, the Jet Black Witch vanished.

“Uh, what?” Tomochika exclaimed, confused. “With the way she was talking, I thought it would be another person who was killed while thinking there was no way they could lose!”

“I wonder what that was about?”

“Perhaps she is simply hiding somewhere?” Mokomoko suggested.

The three of them looked around but couldn’t find any sign of her. At the very least, there was no killing intent, so Yogiri had no intention of retaliating.

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“What *was* that?! That was terrifying!”

The Jet Black Witch. The Dimensional Wanderer. The World-Crossing Beauty. The Godslaying Scourge. The Omnipotent Stranger. The Ruler of Time and Space.

Known by all sorts of names, Miranda sat inside a subspace pocket she had created, clutching her knees and trembling. The moment she had seen that thing, she felt like she had been dropped in the middle of hell. Death itself had taken on human form. What confluence of coincidence and miracle had led to its creation? Even for Miranda, who had witnessed the birth and destruction of numerous worlds, it was a being that defied imagination. Her ability to maintain a haughty demeanor in front of it was raw willpower. If she had relaxed even a little, her soul would have smashed itself to pieces and ended its own life. The eternal darkness that would lead to would seem positively lenient compared to the true erasure that being could cause.

“Then could you give it up?”

The moment she had heard those words, Miranda had felt overwhelming relief. She realized she had been saved. If it had decided to kill her, she

would have had nowhere to run. There was only one way to survive an encounter with that thing: to depend on its mercy. Beg for your life, and hope to be forgiven. The fact that it had a human consciousness was her only saving grace. If it had merely been a vortex of death, it would have indiscriminately and aimlessly devoured the entire world, bringing everything to an end. The fact that such a being was aware of her existence was cause for concern, but managing to escape for now was relief enough.

After she calmed down a little, anger started to bubble up within her. Not towards Yogiri Takatou, but towards the ignorant god that had sent her against him. They were happily yanking the tail of a tiger, with no idea what they were dealing with. They were dancing with their eyes closed through a minefield. She had no idea how much longer they could continue before provoking his wrath. If they wanted to die so badly, they were more than welcome, but she wasn't willing to get herself wrapped up in it.

"Those little bastards."

Angry to the point of wanting to hit something, Miranda stood up.

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The person with the ability to call forth Japanese food was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

The person with the ability to work well with their hands was defeated by Yogiri Takatou.

◇ ◇ ◇

"So in the end, simply being strong isn't sufficient..."

Hiroaki was a boy who had come here from Japan. Hanakawa didn't know where he had obtained his power, but he had the ability to freely create anything he could imagine. Since they were born from his imagination, the armor and robot he had created exhibited exactly the same power as from wherever he had first seen them.

Since picking people at random didn't seem to be having any success, the plan had been to pick someone who was already strong. Upon becoming an apostle, one boy was allowed to have basically any power he wanted, but he ended up asking for the ability to create Japanese food. Apparently, he wasn't

good enough at imagining it himself, so the powers he had couldn't create very good food. His one complaint upon being brought to this world was about the food, so it had seemed like a real lifesaver to him.

The other had been an old man named Ugurz, who had been known as the Demon of Catastrophe. There were many anecdotes about him doing incredible things with his enormous magical power, such as destroying an entire kingdom and raising its people as zombies, destroying entire islands, sinking them into oceans of flame, and enclosing them in walls of eternal ice, but lately he had hidden himself away deep in the mountains. His wish had been to be skilled with his hands so that he could make stuffed animals for his grandchildren.

"Speaking of which, I wonder what happened to Lady Miranda?"

The Jet Black Witch, Miranda. She was a powerful being from the start. Deciding there was no need for any extra powers in order to help with dispatching Yogiri Takatou, she had instead asked to be told the location of a certain person as a reward for her help. After consulting with Malnarilna, they agreed to her terms and sent her after Yogiri.

"Ah, perhaps since she was not granted any powers, the typical announcement upon her defeat was not played."

"Why are you always muttering like that? It's creepy," Yoshifumi said, sitting on his throne.

As before, Hanakawa was standing on the palanquin beside the throne. He had a habit of mumbling to himself, so Yoshifumi didn't pay any attention to the contents of his speech.

"By the way, doesn't it seem like our progress has slowed to a halt?" Hanakawa asked.

"Yeah. Looks like the slaves carrying us were wiped out."

"Are you some sort of fool?! Of course this would happen if you brought a palanquin all the way out here!"

"Shut up! I didn't think they were that weak!"

"They were nothing but men in loincloths! On top of that, they were wide open to being attacked while carrying the palanquin! Why didn't you have some way of protecting them?!"

Getting to the Elven Forest hadn't been a problem, but all of the slaves carrying the palanquin had been killed, devoured by the insects that ran rampant there.

“Hey, Shigeto. What do we do now?”

“I guess we have to walk. The space in the forest is looped, so if we don’t follow a certain path, we’ll end up going in circles. While it is something we must be careful of, the correct route is recorded in my Book of Prophecy.”

Shigeto had become totally obedient. Rei’s domination of him didn’t necessitate any sort of loyalty to Yoshifumi, but it appeared he had already given up. In a way, that was like being defeated by the Sages, but if he was loyal to Yoshifumi, he might have a chance at a rather comfortable life. At the very least, it would be far better than running and hiding, constantly terrified of the threat of the Sages.

“Walking, huh? This sucks.”

Though he complained, the Sage seemed to understand that acting all high and mighty wouldn’t improve the situation. Reluctantly, he rose from his throne and jumped down from the palanquin.

“This situation is no better for me, I assure you,” Hanakawa said, moving to climb off the palanquin himself.

But the black-clad beauty Miranda was standing in front of him.

“Huh?”

Her appearance was so sudden that Hanakawa could only gape in shock. Miranda stretched out a hand, her fingers clenching around his flabby neck.

“Wait! Please, wait! Actually, how do you even recognize me or know where I am?!”

Hanakawa had met Miranda in a dream. He had been in his little girl form as always, so he should have been unrecognizable to her now.

“It seems you underestimated me. Though limited somewhat, I am effectively omnipotent and omniscient. Reaching you was hardly a challenge.”

“Th-Then what are you doing here?! If you know all, you should understand I am nothing but an errand boy!”

“Yes. That’s why I came to you, to take out my anger on someone of no consequence.”

Slowly, she strengthened her grip. Her slender arms possessed an unbelievable strength, not budging in the slightest as Hanakawa tried to shake her off.

“Who the hell are you?!” Yoshifumi noticed what was happening from where he was standing on the ground.

“P-Please, help me!” Hanakawa begged, although he knew it was like clutching at straws. It was just as likely that Yoshifumi would laugh as he watched Hanakawa die, but the emperor was his only hope for survival.

Yoshifumi didn’t move an inch.

“Wh-What are you doing? Judging by your response, shouldn’t you be like, ‘What the hell are you doing to my jester?!’ and jump up here to rescue me?!”

“Dealing with the Sages of this world is a nuisance, so I just stopped time.” Miranda said.

Now that she mentioned it, everything did seem to have stopped. Yoshifumi had, in fact, jumped into action, but after leaping a few inches above the ground, he had frozen.

“N-Noooooo! Why is this happening to me?! And what do you mean, taking out your anger on me?! If that’s what you want, why can’t you pick someone who can offer more resistance?!”

“Even if I am just venting my frustrations, I am not so boorish as to inflict such harm on someone unrelated. Do you understand so little of a maiden’s heart that you don’t realize why I would look for someone at least a little bit related to my anger?”

“Tormenting a weakling like me is plenty boorish!” Hanakawa complained, but Miranda’s grip was only getting tighter.

I-I’m going to die! Though he was constantly using his healing magic on himself, he was starting to lose his grip on consciousness. If he were to pass out now, he would never wake up again. *I need to do something...*

He desperately had to find some clue in their conversation so far. What had made Miranda angry in the first place? If she was still alive, that must have meant that she hadn’t fought Yogiri yet, so she should have had no reason to be angry.

Perhaps she did indeed meet him? And then fled, being unable to do anything? If that was what she was upset about, it must have meant she understood how much of a threat Yogiri was. *In that case...*

Hanakawa had little time left. He wouldn’t be able to try more than once. If he made one wrong move it would all be over, but he had no choice but to bet everything on this.

“I-I am a friend of Sir Takatou, you know!”

“What?”

Her grip on Hanakawa's throat loosened. It was enough for him to finally shake her hand off, and he fell back onto his backside. His desperate gamble seemed to have paid off for the moment.

"I suppose if I were to be killed," Hanakawa continued after a short coughing fit, "Sir Takatou would be heartbroken!"

"Friends, are you?" Miranda's gaze was full of suspicion.

"I-It's true!"

"You hardly seem like someone on friendly terms with him. Yet it is true that he hasn't killed you..." She looked away. If she was omniscient like she claimed, it was possible she was reviewing the details of his relationship with Yogiri.

"A-At the very least, we are members of the same class! Look! If you know all, then you should be able to confirm that! Even if we are not friends, surely it would pain him to learn a classmate of his had died?! If you wish to avoid earning his displeasure, you should avoid taking my life!"

"Fine." The pressure Miranda was giving off vanished. Realizing that he was saved, Hanakawa felt a wave of relief wash over him. "But in that case, I won't be able to calm down until I get revenge against Malnarilna directly."

"I-Is there any way you could accomplish that?"

"Malnarilna is the official god ruling this world. Of course I couldn't do anything to them directly, but that's none of your concern."

With that, she vanished.

"The hell?! Where'd that woman go?!" Yoshifumi finally appeared beside him, shouting. Time was moving again.

"I-I have no idea. I wonder what just happened..." Hanakawa was at a loss for words.

Chapter 20 — If There Aren't Any Elves Here, Then There's No Point Being in This Forest!

Hanakawa once again found himself in an empty white space. He had no memories of going to sleep. Just moments before, he had been walking through the Elven Forest with Yoshifumi. Maybe only his consciousness had been brought to this dream-like space. That would mean either his body was still walking on its own or maybe time was frozen while he was here.

"This again..." He looked around. He had figured he was about to be presented with another apostle candidate, but there was no one else there. "Will they show up later? I'm starting to feel like this is an entirely hopeless endeavor..."

Although he had tried to come up with many ideas for others to overcome Yogiri's instant death power, it was starting to feel like it just wasn't possible. Yogiri could detect killing intent and kill people at will. How on earth was one supposed to deal with that? Hanakawa's imagination had run dry.

"In the end, I suppose only a being powerful enough to nullify his instant death power is capable of dealing with him."

No matter how much defense or instant death resistance once possessed, it was meaningless to Yogiri.

"At first, I thought the ability to perceive killing intent would be the greatest issue. However, after testing a number of things, an unavoidable, unblockable attack that instantly kills is incredibly frustrating."

Death was guaranteed, and resurrection was impossible. Even robots and the undead would die if Yogiri decided they should.

"As such, it appears the best option is to leave him be! If you avoid getting involved with him, he won't do anything to you!"

"That's no good!"

“Yeah, after all this, you have to do something.” Malna and Rilna suddenly appeared in front of him. Knowing this was a dream, he was hardly surprised.

“Nice to meet you again. So, who will you send next? Apparently the otherworldly witch Miranda has fled.”

“She ran to another world, so there’s nothing we can do about it.”

“We’re the gods of *this* world, after all.”

“Is that how it works? I thought you put a curse on the apostles to make them die if no one challenged Yogiri.”

“Nope. Whether someone challenged him or not is kind of vague, so it’s all up to our discretion.”

“If we ever felt like, ‘Man, no one is trying anymore,’ then we’d start punishing people directly.”

Malnarilna’s power didn’t extend beyond their own world, and the punishment for breaking the rules they set wasn’t automatic but rather something they had to execute manually. Hanakawa didn’t know if that information would be useful, but he made note of it just in case.

“So what do you intend for the next apostle? Is there anyone stronger you can use?”

“No?”

“We thought it was about time we sent you.”

“You’ve helped everyone else a lot, so you’ve thought of what to do yourself by now, right?”

“Me?!” Hanakawa sputtered.

“I mean, that was the plan from the start, right?”

“You said you’d do it, didn’t you?”

He *had* promised he would fight Yogiri when he’d first met Malnarilna. He had forgotten about it with all the advice he had been giving since then, but the plan from the start was that Hanakawa would someday have to challenge him directly.

“Can I say that I changed my mind?” he tried.

“Aha ha, of course not.”

“You gotta be pretty brave to try and take back a promise you made with a god.”

“As I assumed!”

These two were gods. There was no way he could go back on his word to

them. He would have to keep up his end of the bargain whether he liked it or not.

"So, did you decide on a power?"

"Did you think about it?"

"Uhh, actually, I have put some thought into it, but if you could give me a little more time..."

"Nope!"

"We already decided you're next!"

"So decide right now!"

"Say it now!"

"You have five minutes!"

"Even if you haven't decided by then, we're sending you to Yogiri Takatou anyway!"

It seemed there was no way for him to buy any more time.

Wait, even if I am teleported near him, all I have to do is avoid fighting him, correct?

The other apostles had all been killed because they'd tried to attack Yogiri. So he just had to do nothing at all. Even if he was teleported beside him and ended up meeting him, he only needed to act friendly with him. It was hard to believe that after his involvement in all of this, Yogiri would consider him a friend, but if he begged on his hands and knees like always, he might be able to get Yogiri to forgive him.

"You're not thinking of running away, are you?"

"You don't think you can avoid fighting him, do you?"

"O-Of course not!"

"You don't have to fight him at all, actually."

"But there are only three apostles left, including you."

"And the rule is that if no one challenges him for a full day, everyone dies."

"You'll die right away, you know?"

At this rate, he had three days to live, at best. If he didn't want to die, he needed to think of a way to defeat Yogiri in the next five minutes.

"But if I had a way of defeating him, I would have told someone how to do that long ago!"

As he struggled in vain to come up with a way to escape his inevitable fate, that fate continued creeping ever closer, second by second.

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After the Jet Black Witch had left them, Yogiri, Tomochika, and Mokomoko were left alone for a while. While it would have been nice if that was the last of the apostles, counting the apostles who had attacked them from a distance, there were more than twelve already, so it seemed best to assume they would keep coming.

"It appears we have about two kilometers to go," Mokomoko said, returning from above the canopy.

"I guess it's good that we're getting closer," Tomochika replied, "but we have no idea what we're going to do when we get there, do we?"

"There might be elves," Yogiri suggested, trying to make her feel better.

"I wonder about that..." Despite being called the Elven Forest, there didn't seem to be any trace of them, so it seemed unlikely they would suddenly appear. "I wonder if you killed them all?"

"You mean maybe every single elf was Izelda? I guess it's possible, but he spread himself out to improve his chances of survival, so I don't think he'd be an entire race."

"Seeing as it's called the 'Elven Forest,' I'd hate to think there aren't elves *anywhere*..." In spite of her words, it appeared Tomochika had given up.

Mokomoko continued cutting a path through the forest. She seemed to have grown quite accustomed to her new role.

"Hm? Something is coming!" she said, coming to a halt. They were about one kilometer out from the ruins.

"There's...a little bit of killing intent." Yogiri felt it faintly. It didn't seem like someone who was absolutely determined, but more like someone who was half-heartedly setting their sights on them.

"It's probably another one of those apostles," Tomochika sighed. Yogiri was similarly sick of them.

"They are above us," Mokomoko observed. "It seems they are traveling through the branches." Now that she mentioned it, they could hear a faint sound of rustling in the trees ahead of them, growing gradually louder.

"That's a new approach," Yogiri observed.

"Yeah. Before, they just waltzed up to us or attacked from a distance,

right?”

The apostles so far had attacked either brazenly, directly, thinking that Yogiri’s instant death ability wouldn’t affect them, or carefully from a distance, trying to take him out without him noticing. If this was neither, perhaps they weren’t an apostle after all.

“Elf...holy land...trespass, humans, unforgivable...die...the barrier...stay away...shrine...great tree...die...die...”

They began to hear broken, disjointed words coming from the trees. Even their translation tool seemed to be having difficulty handling what it was picking up. Whoever it was was clearly having difficulty speaking the common language of this world.

“I-Is it really?! They’re here?! They’re finally here?!” Tomochika was immediately excited.

“Dannoura, no matter how you look at it, they’re clearly hostile. Don’t be so happy to see them.”

“But they even called themselves elves!”

They might have had to kill them right away, but Tomochika wasn’t taking the situation as seriously as Yogiri was.

“What should we do?”

The hostility was getting stronger. If the elves didn’t want the three of them to proceed, maybe it was best to do as they were asked and turn around. However, if they were going to be attacked, they would have to defend themselves.

“It would be best if we could discuss things with them. It is a little irritating to have them watching us while hiding. Here.” Furemaru extended in Enju’s grip. With a wide swing, she cut away the branches and leaves covering whoever was watching them.

“Geh, ga!” With a surprised cry, the owners of the mysterious voices came into view.

“Uhh...”

Tomochika cocked her head. They were incredibly hard to describe. Among the animals Yogiri knew, the closest thing he could think of was a gibbon, but these had four arms. Two long arms were being used to grab onto and travel through the branches. The remaining two held primitive-looking black stone tools. They had legs, but they were short and thin, seemingly not used much for a life in the treetops. In all, they looked like some kind of

monkey, but their skin was green and hard. Their faces were shaped like upside-down triangles, and they had enormous eyes similar to a praying mantis. They almost seemed like insects that looked like monkeys.

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“What the hell kind of elves are these?!” Tomochika exploded.

They were nothing at all like what the term “elf” had made her imagine. But considering the forest they lived in, Yogiri figured their appearance made sense, so he wasn’t overly surprised.

“They do have pointy ears,” he noted.

“That’s the only thing, though, isn’t it?!” On the sides of their heads were something that appeared to be ears, which were long and came to a sharp point. “Give them back! All my expectations! My romance! My fantasy!”

“From their perspective, that’s a pretty unreasonable thing to ask.”

Tomochika had gotten her hopes up all on her own, so that was hardly the elves’ concern.

“Are they not going to attack us?” Yogiri wondered.

“Perhaps not,” Mokomoko answered, “but it doesn’t seem like they intend on allowing us to proceed either.”

The elves had taken up positions in a wide formation in front of them. Seeing that the trio was heading for the cluster of buildings, they were likely there to stop them.

“Does that mean those buildings were the elves’ city after all? That’s good.”

“What’s good about that?! Who cares, if *this* is what’s living there?!”

Yogiri tried calling out to them. “We’re trying to find a way out of the forest.”

“Go...away...”

“Doesn’t seem like they understand. Now what?”

The first impression the elves gave was like that of a primitive, tribal people. Yogiri wasn’t so arrogant as to kill people like that just because they were in the way.

“Let’s just get out of here! If there aren’t any elves, there’s no point being in this forest!”

“It’s not like we came here for the elves...but I guess if they don’t want to let us through, we don’t have to force our way past them.”

Yet, aside from the ruins, they had no other places they could think of going. They still had no idea how to get out of the forest.

As they considered their options, a light began to shine in front of them.

“Are the elves attacking?” asked Tomochika.

It was a circle of light about a meter across. The complex geometric

shapes made it look like a magic circle of some sort.

"Guo, gya!"

They had thought it was a magical attack on the part of the elves, but the elves themselves seemed just as surprised by its appearance. As a person appeared in the center of the circle of light, they made a panicked retreat, seeming to find the sight impossible to believe.

"Huh? Hanakawa?"

Their classmate, Daimon Hanakawa, appeared from the light.

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"First of all!"

"First of all?"

"First of all, please calm down!" Hanakawa said the moment he appeared. "You may be thinking something like, 'What is this guy saying all of a sudden?' but first, deep breaths! Haste will only lead to making mistakes!"

"I mean, we're pretty calm," Yogiri replied. "You're the one who's panicking here."

"Then you won't go, 'Eternal Force Blizzard! And they die!' on me, will you?"

"If you don't attack us, then I won't, so relax."

Hanakawa had heard plenty about Yogiri's power. It was normal for him to be afraid of it after having witnessed it himself, but he should have also known that Yogiri didn't just use it whenever he felt like it.

"First of all, I have no intention of being your enemy. I only wish to explain the current situation!"

"Fine. Mokomoko, could you make a tent for us? Let's take a break."

"Very well."

Mokomoko created a tent from Furemaru, and everyone stepped inside. They sat down on the floor, facing Hanakawa.

"Now then. About this situation. You have been attacked by a number of people calling themselves apostles recently, correct?"

"Yeah, we were."

"Those were all assassins sent by Lord Malnarilna to kill you, Sir Takatou. So, and this part is important, please pay careful attention so you don't misunderstand, but...I would like you to hear me out without getting

angry. You won't get angry with me, right?"

"That depends on what you say."

"Umm, well... I have also become one of those apostles—"

"So you're here to kill Takatou too?" Tomochika asked.

"Is that so? That's unfortunate."

If he attacked them, Yogiri would have no choice but to retaliate. He couldn't say that he felt nothing at the prospect of killing Hanakawa, but he wouldn't hesitate if he had to.

"Of course not! Absolutely no way! I am fully aware that I have no chance whatsoever against you! I have no intention of becoming your enemy!"

"Then why are you here?"

"Lord Malnarilna teleported me here to try and force me to fight you."

"But if you don't want to fight, then what's the problem?"

Apostle or not, if he didn't attack them, they wouldn't have an issue.

"Right. But what are you going to do then, Hanakawa? Just wander around the forest?" Tomochika asked.

"Wait! Why are you working on the assumption you will be abandoning me already?!"

"Come on. We've all been acting like nothing happened, but remember what you did when we first got to this world?" Tomochika asked, looking at him through half-closed eyes.

Immediately after they were summoned, Hanakawa had decided to use his advantage of prior experience in this world to do whatever he liked. The first thing he had done was attempt to assault Tomochika, so it wasn't so easy to forgive him.

"Huh? Oh, uhh, didn't you end up forgiving me at some point along the way?"

"No?"

"Ah, I see."

"I think it's a bit too cruel to leave him here, though, so we can at least take him outside the forest with us, can't we?"

"Ohhh! As expected of Sir Takatou! You have certainly come a long way since abandoning me in the Forest of Beasts!"

"Oh yeah, I forgot about that."

"I almost died there, you know! I am rather magnanimous, so I hold no

enmity towards you for that time, but there still remains a problem with my role as apostle!"

"What is it?"

"Well, you see, if no apostle challenges you for a full day, then every one of us dies!"

"Speaking of which, how many apostles are there?" Yogiri asked.

"Their numbers continue to increase with no strict limit, but last I heard, there were three left, including myself."

"So you have at most three days left to live?"

"That is correct, but I would appreciate it if you sounded a bit more concerned! I have no wish to die!"

"Yeah, I guess everyone feels that way," Tomochika commented offhandedly.

"So flippant! I would ask that you treat my life with a bit more, how would you say...gravity?"

"But that's your problem." Yogiri figured there was nothing they could do about it.

"As such, I would like you to fight me now!"

"You just said you had three days left, didn't you?"

"Well, I was told to fight you and return, so I can't just refrain! So I would like you to pretend we are fighting extraordinarily hard, and after a resounding victory for you, I can say, 'I tried my best but didn't stand a chance, as expected of Sir Takatou.' And then you can be like, 'Heh, you're pretty good! I like you! Good fight, let's call it a draw!' If we do that, maybe I'll be able to extend my deadline a little!"

As usual, Hanakawa suggested an incredibly annoying plan.

Chapter 21 — A Resounding Victory for Daimon Hanakawa!

Stepping out of the tent, Hanakawa and Yogiri faced off. Tomochika and Enju stood a small distance away to watch. They had decided to fight, but as discussed earlier, they'd agreed beforehand that the battle would end in a draw, so there was little meaning to it. At best, it would extend Hanakawa's life a little. At worst, Malnarilna wouldn't accept a draw as a legitimate result.

That was Hanakawa's plan. It wasn't guaranteed to work and would require him to make a number of risky gambles, but it was better than doing nothing at all.

"So, how exactly do you want to fight?" Yogiri asked, a little confused, which was to be expected. If Hanakawa tried to do anything that might kill Yogiri, he would die first. It was almost impossible to have a real fight.

"Actually, you see. As an apostle, I was given a special power."

"Powers, huh? I saw lots of them from the others."

"I was told to think of a power that would be able to defeat you, so what I decided on was a summoning ability."

"I see. That way it doesn't matter if the thing you summon dies."

"Precisely!"

To put it simply, he just had to summon someone who could beat Yogiri. His ability was to summon anything he pleased. However, as much as he was capable of summoning anything, there was a single condition: they had to consent to the summoning. So while he technically had the ability to summon anyone, he couldn't actually use it that freely. The first gamble he had to make was whether the person he summoned would answer.

"All right... Come forth! Malnarilna! Daimon Hanakawa summons you!" he called out in a loud voice.

After waiting a while, nothing happened.

"Looks like they're not coming," Yogiri remarked, giving him a pitying

gaze.

"Gah! Failing right from the start?! Uhh, Malnarilna! This is the power you gave me, remember?! If you don't show up, it will be a stain on your honor!"

"*Whaaaat? That's no fair!"*

"But we did say he could summon anyone," a voice echoed from nowhere in particular.

The ground began to shine with a brilliant light. The plants and trees in a wide area around them vanished as a huge magic circle appeared. A blizzard of flower petals filled the air, and sparkling lights lit up all around them. The light gathered in the center of the magic circle and with an impressive chime revealed two young girls.

Hanakawa had succeeded with his first gamble. He had successfully summoned Malnarilna.

"What was that all about?" he complained. "That's totally different from when I was summoned. I just appeared from the magic circle without any of those effects!"

"That's because your rarity is, like, common."

"We're, like, ultra god rare or something."

"There's no way we'd have the same effects."

The two girls stepped over to Hanakawa's side. "So, we answered your summon and all."

"But we already said we're not going to fight Yogiri Takatou, remember?"

"Wait! Perhaps your pride will not allow you to take action against him directly, but now that you've been summoned by my power, there should be no problem if you defeat him!"

"Ahh, I get it."

"You're trying to give us a good excuse to fight him ourselves."

"E-Exactly! Does that not make me look exceedingly quick-witted? If I have the power to summon anything, what did you think I would summon? Of course it would be a god! In this case, even if you defeat Yogiri Takatou, things will end well!"

"I guess so."

"It's been pretty fun so far."

"But we're starting to get sick of it."

“Should we call an end to this game, then?”

His second gamble, getting Malnarilna to agree to end it themselves, had also succeeded.

“Okay, I guess this is the first time we’ve met face to face.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m Malna!”

“I’m Rilna!”

“The two of us together are Malnarilna! Yay!” The two clapped their hands together, posing for Yogiri.

“Hanakawa, is this the god you were talking about?”

“Quite so. Now, all you must do is slay them where they stand! Once defeated, you will no longer have to put up with the constant stream of apostles bothering you!”

The third gamble wasn’t much of a risk. No matter who won the fight, he would come out safe. If Malnarilna won, he just needed to do as they said, and if Yogiri won, he just needed to do what *he* said. Therefore, if he was going to bet on Yogiri winning, he needed to make a better impression on him. The reason he had summoned Malnarilna in the first place was because he was confident Yogiri would win. That was all.

“All right, what should we do?”

“Good question. How about we show off our instant death abilities?”

“An instant death contest!”

“Okay, first a demonstration!”

“Let’s kill Hanakawa!”

“Why would you choose to kill me?!” Hanakawa cried.

“I mean, you’re on Yogiri Takatou’s side, right?”

“You’ve been so cheeky about it.”

Maybe trying to ingratiate himself with Yogiri had been a mistake.

“Th-That is just...uhh...right! I am simply trying to encourage Sir Takatou to spur him to action so that the match can be settled quickly! Also, perhaps it is strange for me to say this, but Sir Takatou will probably feel nothing at all if you kill me, so it is actually a waste of your time!”

Hanakawa offered a flurry of excuses that were hardly good enough.

“I guess you’re right.”

“No one would really care if Hanakawa died.”

“That is in itself something I feel the need to object to!” Hanakawa

protested.

"Then how about that girl over there?"

"Her name is Tomochika, right?"

"Huh?" Tomochika was startled by the sudden mention of her name.

"Okay, then die."

"No, you die." Yogiri's words overlapped with those of the god. The result was unsurprising. One girl collapsed to the ground. Was it Malna or Rilna? Hanakawa honestly had no idea which was which.

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"Huh?"

Malna looked down at the collapsed Rilna. She didn't understand what was happening. Killing Tomochika Dannoura should have been easy. Super powerful attacks weren't necessary to kill something like humans. As gods, they could manipulate life and death like flipping a switch. It was like turning a dial from "alive" to "dead." A god was capable of things like that. The difference in power between a human and a god was unfathomable, so no matter how the human struggled, they had no way to resist.

There was no such thing as a real fight between a god and a human, so any contest between them wouldn't be interesting. The moment they thought to defeat their opponent, they would win. It would be totally boring.

So she didn't understand why, while Tomochika was standing there with a look of mild confusion, Rilna had fallen to the ground. There was no doubt that Rilna had tried to kill Tomochika. While Malna and Rilna were technically different beings, they each understood what the other thought as if they shared a mind.

But now, Malna had no idea what Rilna was thinking. It took a moment for her to realize that it meant that Rilna wasn't thinking of anything at all. The fact that she was lying on the ground didn't mean anything. They were only possessing temporary vessels anyway, so no matter what happened to the vessel itself, it wouldn't affect their existence as gods in the slightest. More important was the fact that she had suddenly stopped thinking. Malna didn't understand that, so she stopped to think herself. She realized the reason Rilna wasn't thinking was because her ability to do so had been stopped.

Normally, one would assume at this point that Yogiri had something to do

with it, but the thought didn't even occur to her. The concept of a human being able to affect a god in any way was beyond the scope of her imagination. She didn't know why it had happened, but if Rilna had been "stopped," she just needed to be restarted. Yet, she couldn't restart Rilna at all.

"Are you that shocked she died when she was trying to kill someone else?" Yogiri asked.

How long had she stood there frozen? Slowly, she lifted her head to look at him. Hearing his words, she remembered that Yogiri possessed an instant death ability, but she still couldn't believe he had anything to do with this. With no warning at all, Rilna had collapsed. Although nothing seemed to have happened, she had completely stopped. Yogiri hadn't done anything. Objectively, all he had done was say "No, you die." No power had been emitted from his body, and there were no signs of anything having happened to Rilna. Even so, she had stopped moving.

Malna couldn't connect the effect to any cause related to Yogiri. Even as a god, her eyes hadn't seen anything. Yogiri had told her to die, and suddenly Rilna was motionless. That was all. There didn't seem to be anything connecting those two facts, so she couldn't even recognize that Yogiri possessed an instant death power.

It was impossible. She didn't understand. But Rilna had stopped moving. Malna's thoughts kept going in circles, wearing her down. That repeating process began to produce an indescribable emotion in her.

Malna and Rilna were total equals. Anything Malna could do, Rilna could do. Anything Malna liked, Rilna liked, and the same went for anything she hated. While there were some small differences in the way they thought, they weren't enough to distinguish between them. Rather, it was more like they were one person with two personalities constantly changing places.

Together they were Malnarilna. But Rilna wasn't moving. So they weren't Malnarilna anymore. Once her thoughts reached that place, it felt like her heart had filled with ash. The intense feeling of loss caused her thoughts to start flickering. Despair blinded her.

"Ah..."

And finally, Malna realized that she herself might also be stopped. Her temporary body was responding to her feelings. She felt nauseous. She felt dizzy. Her ears were ringing, and her arms and legs started to tremble.

Though her body was only built to reproduce the appearance of a person, her breathing became rapid, and her heart rate began to accelerate. She didn't even realize that what she was feeling was fear. As a god, ever since her birth, the emotion of fear had been totally foreign to her. She had thought she understood what fear was from seeing it in other people, but she had never felt it herself.

Malna screamed as she ran off, having lost all sense of herself.

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"Bwa ha ha ha! A resounding victory for Daimon Hanakawa!"

"Why does it feel like Hanakawa is the winner in all this?" Tomochika sighed, seeing their classmate positively dancing.

"Seriously! To see that god brought low after all they put me through, I cannot help but celebrate!"

"One of them ran away, though," Yogiri said. He didn't know which one was Malna and which was Rilna, but the survivor had fled. Their arrival had been incredibly flashy, but that had apparently all been meaningless visual effects, as she had teleported away without warning.

"Ah! That is potentially quite dangerous! Do you not think she might return later seeking revenge?!"

"If she does, I'll just kill her then." Yogiri wasn't a pacifist. If necessary, he was more than willing to preemptively kill people. In this case, he had only killed one of the pair, so it was possible the survivor would continue to send apostles after him. That would be annoying enough that he could justify killing her. But even so, he didn't feel any desire to kill someone who had been frozen in fear.

"She was clearly pretty scared, so maybe she'll leave us alone for a while," Tomochika said.

"If we get attacked by any other apostles, I'll consider it an attack from her." Yogiri had seen Malnarilna. He was aware of their existence now and could kill them whenever he felt like it. But if the surviving god didn't bother him anymore, he would be fine with leaving her alone.

"Okay, I guess we should continue on to the elven village," he announced. "It should be close by, right?"

"I suppose about one kilometer?" Mokomoko replied.

“I don’t know, is that really an elven village?” Tomochika asked. “I wouldn’t expect those kinds of creatures to live in stone structures.”

“Would you mind if I were to accompany you?”

“I guess not. We can’t just leave you behind— Wait, maybe we can?”

“No, you can’t! If you do, I’ll definitely die!”

Abandoning Hanakawa in a forest when they didn’t know how to get out would be bad for his conscience. Yogiri decided to bring him along for the time being.

Chapter 22 — I Thought I Was a Goner, but Looks Like I Was Saved

Malna stood in a space filled with vividly colored buildings. The pillars were red, the walls yellow, and the roofs gold. From her perspective, it was hard to believe anyone existed with an aesthetic sense that would allow for such a gaudy display of color.

For a moment she didn't recognize it, but quickly realized she was in the Heavenly Throne, a place used to manage the world that she rarely visited. The world ran itself mostly automatically, so as long as they didn't need to make any large-scale changes, there wasn't much use for this place.

It was basically abandoned. Of course, buildings set up for the use of gods wouldn't decay. They had been built by the previous gods of this world, but thinking they were in bad taste, Malna had avoided coming here ever since taking over.

"I'm sure you're wondering why you're here, of all places."

Malna turned to look at the source of the voice. A boy was standing there. The ever-present smirk on his face was somehow familiar to her. He was one of the old, fallen gods from before her arrival.

"I thought I was a goner after sinking to the bottom of the ocean and getting eaten by a giant fish, but it looks like I was saved."

Malna doubted his story, but the details rose up in the back of her mind. Yogiri Takatou and his friends had ridden the dragon, and it had fallen into the ocean after losing its strength. The humans had escaped, but the dragon had just sunk. As he fell into the depths, an enormous sea monster had swallowed him whole. He had been telling the truth, but even fallen as he was, he was still a god. There was no way he'd be killed by a wild animal.

"I ended up going overboard with my powers a bit. If the seal hadn't been released, this body would have been in a rough spot. Oh, do you need me to introduce myself? I'm Kouryu. It's more of a nickname, but I've surprisingly taken a liking to it, so I'd be happy if you called me that."

Gods were fundamentally indestructible. Even if you killed or erased them, in time they would reappear. So in battles between gods, it was common for the winner to either enslave the loser or take measures to seal them away.

During the battle for control of this world, seven gods had perished, and four had fled. The one that had remained refused slavery and resisted until the end, so Rilna had sealed his powers. The key to that seal was the caster herself, so as long as she lived, no one could ever remove it.

“What do you want? Are you planning on taking back the world or something?” Malna was strangely flustered. Even though she was a god, things she didn’t understand kept happening over and over. She wasn’t in a state to keep up her usual playful demeanor.

“Well, that might be a bit challenging. The twelve of us together lost to just two of you. Even if there’s only one of you left, I find it hard to imagine I could match your strength.”

As he said, even with his godly powers returned to him, Kouryu had no chance against Malna by himself.

“So if you’re wondering why you’re here, it’s because I called you. You were just jumping around without any goal in mind, right? So there was a bit of room for me to intervene. You were running away, not caring where you ended up, so I went ahead and decided your destination for you.”

That was certainly possible. She had been thoughtlessly jumping around, with no thought at all as to where she might end up.

“As for what I want...nothing in particular. I just wanted to make fun of you a bit.”

“What?! Do you want me to kill you or something?!”

“Uhh, I don’t think I could really die right now. I couldn’t win, but I don’t think I’d lose. Anyway, what do you think of Yogiri Takatou?”

Malna went quiet. Those words brought the events that had just occurred back to the front of her mind. She still hadn’t got her thoughts in order. She hadn’t been able to figure out what was going on.

“Do you know something about that thing?!” she demanded.

“I’m not going to tell you anything. I’m here to make fun of you. So go ahead and squirm all you want. Just seeing that helps my stomach settle.”

For a god like Malna, not knowing Yogiri’s true nature was strange in itself. As an all-knowing, almighty god, it was unthinkable that anything

within her domain would be unknown to her.

"Now then," Kouryu continued, "fundamentally, gods are omniscient and omnipotent, but as you know there are a number of gods out there. If *all* of them were all-powerful like that, it would be pretty strange. I mean, omnipotence is kind of contradictory in and of itself."

Taken literally, the idea of omnipotence, the ability to do anything, engendered its own paradox. The common example would be, can an omnipotent being create a stone so heavy that no one can lift it? If they can't, then they aren't omnipotent. But if they could create a stone so heavy that they themselves can't lift it, then they aren't omnipotent either.

"We've all kind of agreed to just turn a blind eye to the omnipotence paradox, but that still leaves the problem of when two omnipotent beings face off. In that case, it becomes a contest of the scope and strength of one's omnipotence."

Of course, that was something Malna knew. Those who were omnipotent could only exercise that power within their own domain. On top of that, there was a strength associated with their omnipotence as well, which was the deciding factor in a fight between omnipotent beings. If their domains overlapped and their powers were of equal strength, they would balance each other out and both become powerless.

"And as far as omniscience goes, we can't know all information all at once. Though we call ourselves gods, we still have intelligence, sentiments, and emotions, and we still think of things sequentially. Even if we are omniscient, that knowledge is still based on an individual soul and will. So it's not like we know everything right from the start. By deciding we want to learn about something, we can gain that information."

"What are you even trying to say?" Malna interrupted.

"Just setting things up. Now then. In order to maintain omniscience, you can't be allowed to not know something, but by what I just said, as long as you don't *try* to understand that thing, then there's no problem. So, your parent, I guess? Or your *creator* probably never told you. If you don't know, you won't think about it, and thus your omniscience can be maintained."

"So what?!" Malna was starting to get angry at his roundabout, condescending speech.

"What I'm saying is, you're not omniscient anymore. You don't know what Yogiri Takatou is, do you? Therefore, your omniscience has collapsed."

By pointing that out, he had shaken the foundation of Malnarilna's divinity. "On top of that, Malna and Rilna are supposed to be equals. If one of you can be killed, that means the other can be as well. Makes you wonder whether you're really omnipotent too."

Her divinity was shaken even more. Malna could feel cracks begin to run through the foundations of her godhood. Things were getting bad for her.

"So beings that hold themselves to be omnipotent and omniscient exclude that thing entirely from their thinking," Kouryu explained. "Those who don't know about it are never taught. If they never challenge it, they'll still be omnipotent. If they never try to learn about it, they'll still be omniscient."

"Th-There's no way something like that exists! There's no way!"

"But it does, unfortunately. And even more unbelievable is that there's no way to escape Yogiri Takatou either. It's over for you."

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Malna looked at Yogiri Takatou in disbelief. Eyes appeared. Like they had been there the whole time, just shut until now. Eyelids opened to reveal countless eyes all around her. That was the embodiment of the concept of sight. It was a sign that Yogiri Takatou was aware of her existence. He knew she was looking at him, and he was looking back at her.

"So, getting back on topic," Kouryu continued, "in a fight between omnipotent beings, territory is pretty important. In a place where their power doesn't reach, they can't fight against other omnipotent beings. By the way, where exactly are we?"

The Heavenly Throne. The place where the world was managed; the base of the old gods.

"With your other half's death, my seal was released. At the same time, I got just a bit of my domain back. This is a place where I can use *my* omnipotence."

"So what?! That doesn't change that this is still my domain too!"

"Yeah, and you're much stronger than I am, so I can't beat you."

"Then what do you want?! Just get to the point!"

"I'll just have someone who *can* beat you do it."

Something struck Malna's back. A pale, slender arm punched through her from behind and burst out through her chest.

"Let me introduce you two," Kouryu said. "This is the Jet Black Witch, Miranda, and her hobby is killing gods. She's also known as the Godslaying Scourge."

"Wh-Why...?" Malna recognized she had been dealt a fatal blow.

"I shook the foundations of your divinity, got you in my domain, and then obtained the help of another omnipotent being," Kouryu explained. "I wasn't quite sure it would be enough, but it seems to have worked."

"I was trying to think of some way of getting back at you," Miranda added. "Overkill like this feels quite nice."

"W-Wait... If I disappear, then this world—"

"You think I care what happens to your world?" Miranda spat. For a world-crossing witch, this place alone meant nothing to her.

"I'll take over as god for you," Kouryu snickered. "Don't worry, it's nothing I haven't done before."

"Th-That's not what I mean! They will... This...world..."

But Malna disappeared, unable to explain anything.

Chapter 23 — Interlude: My Puppy Got Split in Two!

It had wandered into this world searching for signs of a god. It roamed aimlessly, approaching anything that appeared within range of its senses. Basically, the only thing it could do was kill. So when it encountered a person who wasn't its intended target, it killed them. If they were in the way, if they fought back, or if it needed information from them, it killed them.

Of course, it wasn't like it had an obsession with killing everything besides the god it was searching for. If it realized the target was unrelated, it sometimes picked a new objective and left. The criteria for that decision weren't very clear. It didn't truly understand itself. It contained a number of processing devices, but they had been randomly inserted into it and weren't connected in any way. The person who had sent it here likely didn't have any particular plan in mind. It just needed to come across its target at some point. That's as much thought as they had put into it.

"Ah, dammit! My puppy's been split in two! What the hell is wrong with you?!"

In a forest near the abandoned ruins of the capital of Manii, a divine woman stood facing off against the Aggressor known as the Hedgehog. Its black body covered in blades was an incarnation of slaughter and had claimed countless lives in this world already. The Wolf King, an enormous wolf that the woman had been riding, had become another one of the Hedgehog's victims.

"I can hardly believe it. Why would you ignore me and kill him?!"

The creature's actions had been perfectly normal. The god had had her defenses ready and showed no openings at all, so it had attacked the wolf. A half-hearted attack wouldn't affect a god, but an emotional shock could cause her to lose her composure. So it had hoped to create an opening to strike, but besides being surprised, she hadn't let down her guard in the slightest.

The creature hadn't considered what it would do next. It merely repeated

the same actions everywhere it went, not thinking about whether those actions would help lead it to its ultimate objective. The Hedgehog was broken—one could call it a manufacturing defect. Having been sent into this world without a proper tuning up, the numerous processors it possessed made decisions independently of each other, making it incapable of seeing the big picture.

"Just die!" The Hedgehog's right arm was twisted off and blown away. "So you can even dodge that?!"

Although she seemed furious at first, the woman howled with glee upon seeing the Hedgehog's response. She had performed an attack on the past. The Hedgehog responded to the attack by moving even further into the past, partially avoiding the attack that had forcibly rewritten an already determined outcome. Within a limited space-time environment, the ability to alter phenomena was only natural for a god. If one couldn't fight on that level, they had no business fighting a god. For the Hedgehog, who had been designed specifically to fight against gods, such an ability was a necessary function.

"As expected of a god-slaying machine! But you're clearly no match for me! What're you gonna try next?!"

This wasn't the world that this woman ruled over, so she couldn't exercise her full power. But even so, the difference in strength was evident. So what could it do? The Hedgehog didn't have the capacity for thought. It simply did what was possible at that moment. Deploying the blades all around its body, it leaned forward, gathering power.

"Ohhh? A desperate last stand, is it? All right, then. I'm fine with that!"

The woman clapped her hands together in front of her chest. With an explosive sound, the world changed. The domain of her control expanded around her. Even as the Hedgehog was dragged into her world, it sat there, unmoving, still gathering power. Whether or not one was a god, if they were in a foreign domain, they couldn't exercise their full power. Even if the woman expanded her own domain here, the power she could employ would be limited.

The Hedgehog was expanding its own domain on a smaller scale around it. Because of that, the god's power wouldn't be able to reach it directly. At the very least, it could avoid instant death.

Then eyes appeared. Countless eyes opened, encircling the Hedgehog.

This time, she no doubt intended to land a solid hit. Past, present, future, she would unleash an attack that saw through everything and would be completely unavoidable. The Hedgehog continued gathering power, ignoring them all.

The woman swung her arms wide. Adopting a physical stance was totally unnecessary for a god, but there were some who found this type of acting useful. This woman must have been one of those who felt that her power increased when she did such things.

Quietly, power filled the space between the two of them. The moment before those two powers collided, something changed. The presence of a god that hadn't been there before filled the air for a brief moment, then vanished. Like a wave, originating from some other point, it simply passed through the space they were occupying.

"Huh? That was... Oh, I see. The god of this world had sealed it away! No wonder we couldn't find it no matter how much we looked!"

For a moment, the sense of that god held the woman's attention. It was a once in a lifetime opportunity for the Hedgehog. If it struck in that opening, even if it couldn't defeat her, it could inflict serious damage.

But instead it turned and ran. Its priorities had changed. This was the presence of the Hedgehog's original target, the waveform of the god it was designed to slay.

"Hey, wait!"

It heard the woman's voice from far away, but at the speed with which it ran, it soon lost track of her entirely. It continued to run towards the source of that wave. It had only sensed its target for a brief moment, and the wave had long since faded away. It wasn't nearby, nor did the Hedgehog know its precise location. But it still ran blindly forward, howling a piercing, otherworldly cry. It was hard to tell whether it possessed any sort of emotion, but to those who heard it, that voice would have seemed to be filled with overwhelming joy.

MY INSTANT DEATH ABILITY IS SO OVERPOWERED, NO ONE IN THIS OTHER WORLD STANDS A CHANCE AGAINST ME!

Side Story

Curse-Drenched

Those who approached it carelessly, thinking it was only a child, died the moment it saw them. Those who carefully kept their distance and attacked from afar died the moment they made the decision to strike. The animals died, the birds died, the insects died. Anything that lay in its path died.

It was hollow. No one knew what it wanted. All they knew was that death was continuing to spread. After annihilating the cult hidden in the mountains, it just staggered onward. Returning to the wilderness, it was walking around without a goal.

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Wearing the robes of a Buddhist priest, a bald man with an exaggeratedly large headset walked through the mountains. Dougen had come to the place where the boy spreading death was supposed to be. The sun was still bright in the sky, but everything around him was strangely quiet. The sounds of birds and insects were gone. All he could hear was the gentle sound of plant life swaying in the wind.

“So how about blocking its path? If we surrounded it with barricades, we could at least stop the damage from spreading.”

Dougen was suppressing his presence. Halfway up the mountain, there was still a significant distance between him and the boy, but he had heard that anyone the boy saw died. There was no such thing as being too careful.

“It would be nice if it were that easy.” The woman at his side had hidden herself as well, the only sign of her presence being her voice. She was a fox youkai. If she was capable of hiding herself like that, he didn’t know why she hadn’t done it from the start instead of walking through town, flaunting her bewitching form.

“It would have to be a pretty wide area, so you’d need a lot of manpower,” Dougen admitted.

“It isn’t very realistic, is it? Acquiring such manpower and materials and

constructing something so quickly on such short notice."

The first group had already been wiped out. On top of that, their own group consisted of those specialized in dealing with the supernatural, and bounty hunters. It was hard to believe such people would be very useful in constructing a barricade.

"First of all, what is our actual plan here? Are we just supposed to kill it?" Dougen asked.

The Restricted Territory Disaster Management Task Force hadn't explained that part very clearly. He and the others had simply been given the headsets for communication and then told to get as close as they could.

"Not at all. Nothing as dangerous as that," the fox replied. "It's not like it's possible to kill the boy anyway. I suspect we are supposed to calm him down somehow."

"Calm him down, huh? And that branch family said they know some way of doing it?"

Entering the boy's field of view would cost you your life. Merely getting close to him was difficult enough.

"It's kind of dangerous that he seems to have lost his mind, but perhaps that is better in the end." The boy was wandering aimlessly. It didn't seem like he had a clear intent to kill anything. "Shall we start by making a pit?"

"Can you do that?"

"I'm pretty good at moving dirt around."

As the fox said that, the ground in front of Dougen suddenly opened into a trench, which widened into an enormous hole. It continued expanding to the sides, swallowing trees as it grew into an enormous chasm.

"If I keep going like this and surround him, maybe I'll be able to keep him from getting out."

Dougen gulped. Seeing her so casually change the landscape around him really demonstrated the meaning behind the title of Greater Youkai.

"Foxes are associated with the element of earth, aren't they? I suppose something like this is nothing special to you."

"Those five elements are something you all made up on your own," she commented.

After a while, the chasm had reached all the way back around, connecting with its starting point. It was about five meters wide, encircling the entire side of the mountain. A child who wasn't even ten years old wouldn't have a

chance of jumping across it.

"Did you get him inside?"

"If I look too closely he'll probably notice me, so I don't know exactly where he is, but he's definitely somewhere on the mountain above us. I think this should be fine."

"What if we just left him like this? Would he eventually exhaust himself?"

"I wonder. He does normally love his sleep."

"Lord Okakushi's power is limitless. If left as he is, he will continue wandering forever, I'm sure."

A voice was coming through the headsets they wore. It was the head of the Task Force, Masamichi Shidou.

"You told us to get close to him, right? Do you have some plan if we can do that?"

"I didn't want this to become public knowledge...but since you are the only ones left, I suppose it's all right. There is an ancient covenant between Lord Okakushi and our people. To put it simply, there are rules in place to make him listen to our requests."

"If that's all it takes, why didn't you tell us that from the start?" If they had known, they might have been able to avoid some of the deaths.

"You may not think much of it, but the fact that there is a way to make Lord Okakushi listen to our requests is absolutely secret."

"I suppose it would be a big deal if people knew a power like that could be controlled." Dougen recalled his experience of visiting the village a few years ago and the overwhelming fear he had felt towards the thing hidden within the darkness.

"I wouldn't be so arrogant as to say we can control him. In the end, it's no more than making a request of him."

"So, what are the rules, then?"

"I can't tell you. Just get closer for now."

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"This much has to remain a mystery."

"Then why don't you go yourself?"

"I am an ordinary human. I would be killed long before I could get close to him if he has gone berserk."

"You said we only have to get close to him, but doesn't anyone who sees him die?"

"I did hear he possessed a power like that."

"Then there's nothing we can do, is there?"

"We have a number of reports of people who have observed him, so it doesn't seem that is the case at the moment."

It was no more than conjecture, and even if it were true, they had no idea how long it would last. But they couldn't just sit there and wring their hands forever.

Dougen resolved himself. Getting a small running start, he leaped over the chasm.

"Oh, you can jump quite well, can't you?" The fox's voice was right beside him. Apparently, she had come along.

"Do you know where he is?" he asked.

"We just need to go straight from here."

"Wouldn't it be easier if you went ahead by yourself, invisible?"

"Perhaps, but I don't really know how this device works." She must have meant the headsets they had been provided with. If she couldn't use it, she would have no way of communicating with the task force.

"Even though you've got a credit card?"

"That's different. All you have to do is hand it over and sign something. Anyway, I'll help you where I can."

Hiding among the trees, Dougen carefully made his way up the mountain. The boy was likely still quite a distance ahead of them. If he noticed their presence, it would be all over for them, so Dougen paid the utmost attention to keeping himself well hidden.

As they proceeded, a restless feeling began to fill the area. It was a clearly evil presence, like a kind of miasma in the air.

"This is strange," the fox mused. "That boy doesn't normally give off something so easy to notice."

"You're right. Does that mean something else is up here?"

Being noticed by whatever was causing it could also be a problem.

This is bad, Dougen thought to himself. As they headed towards the summit, the tree cover was becoming sparse. His method of keeping himself hidden was to blend his presence in with the natural world around him. If there were fewer trees around, the effect would diminish. And it wasn't such a powerful ability that it could make himself invisible in a place with no cover. Even so, he continued as far as he was able to go. Then the treeline

came to an abrupt end, and the boy suddenly appeared in his field of view.

Dougen felt a chill run down his spine. Even though he knew merely seeing the boy could be his death, he had encountered him entirely unprepared. Luckily, he wasn't dead. It seemed the boy wasn't killing anyone who could see him for now.

The boy was staring blankly up at the sky. Bizarre creatures were falling all around him. They weren't people or animals or insects. Creatures that seemed to defy all classification, like they had been built with parts from various animals, lay scattered around him.

"Are those the people from the West?"

"I suppose those are what they call devils." The bizarre atmosphere must have been caused by them.

Dougen looked around. The summit was covered with nothing but grass, so if he continued any farther, he would be plainly visible. He moved around to get behind the boy. Using the trees as cover, he moved slowly and carefully. The boy wasn't moving, so maneuvering behind him wasn't too difficult.

"I'm right near him. What do I do next?"

"Could you put this headset on Lord Okakushi?"

"Why didn't you just say that earlier?" He had thought that the task force would finally step in at this point, but now they were telling him to get even closer. He couldn't help but complain.

"We needed to keep it a secret for as long as possible."

It didn't seem to him like there was much point in keeping it a secret, but he couldn't turn back now. However, what Shidou was asking of him was incredibly difficult. Put a headset on a boy standing in an open field without him noticing you. If he noticed you, you would die. It wasn't something anyone sane would try to accomplish.

"I suppose if you have no hostile intentions, it should be possible."

"Fox, could you do it?"

"My very existence could be seen as an attack on a human. There's a limit to how much I can keep myself hidden. I suppose there's such a thing as being too strong."

Just because he couldn't see her didn't mean the fox had completely erased herself. Just having her nearby gave him a vaguely uncomfortable, unpleasant feeling.

“So I’ll have to do it myself?” This mission was absurd. If he turned and ran now, no one would have a right to complain. But Dougen was a man who fought for the sake of saving the world. Risking his life for his mission was to be expected.

“Now while he’s distracted is a good time, don’t you think?” the fox suggested. The boy wasn’t doing anything in particular, just staring at the sky. There was nothing up there that he was looking at, though. At most, there were clouds slowly drifting by.

Dougen removed his headset and held it in one hand. “I’m going now. Don’t say anything.”

He carefully began walking. The grass at the summit came up to his knees. Any amount of movement would shift the grass as well, and of course make sound. So he moved slowly and carefully, matching his movements to the sound of wind blowing through.

It was irritatingly slow, but he couldn’t rush it. He paid close attention to every trifling detail, suppressing his presence as much as possible. After what felt like an eternity, he was finally one step away from the boy.

But once he got that far, the boy moved. He stopped looking up at the sky and looked forward.

Dammit! You choose now to move?!

Dougen had made it this far, but it was all going to be for nothing. He hesitated, considering jumping forward and getting the headset on him immediately.

Then the boy began to turn. Dougen hadn’t been discovered yet, so the action was likely random. But that put him in a predicament. He had nowhere to run. No matter how much he covered his presence, there was no way he could avoid being seen there. Even if he ran away, he would be seen. There was nothing he could do but jump forward.

The moment he made that decision, something exploded in the distance. A torrent of sand and earth burst into the air like a spring of water, catching the boy’s attention. He returned his gaze to something straight ahead. The fox must have created a diversion to draw the boy’s attention.

Dougen quickly closed the remaining distance between them and placed the headset on the boy’s head from behind. He couldn’t get the ear pads on him perfectly, but that was the best he could manage. Leaping backwards, he retreated, keeping the boy in his sight. He couldn’t bear to look away.

A sound began to play from the headset, a stream of syllables enumerated in a human voice. It sounded like a sutra of some sort, but despite being a priest, he wasn't familiar with it. It must have been some sort of spell for calming down the boy known as Lord Okakushi.

The boy turned around. This time, he was clearly turning specifically to look at Dougen. There was no way Dougen could suddenly jump back or escape.

The boy saw him, and the emptiness in his eyes sent a chill down the priest's spine. He prepared himself to die. If it was an instant death, then he wouldn't suffer, but he had no idea how that death would be delivered.

For a while, they stared at each other. Nothing happened. Perhaps the task force's secret technique had worked, as the boy suddenly collapsed where he stood.

"Seems like he's asleep. Maybe he was just tired?" At some point, the fox had appeared beside him.

Dougen dropped to the ground. He didn't feel like moving for a while.

◇ ◇ ◇

At the Independent Higher Order Lifeform Research Institute, in the wilderness near a certain city, in a certain prefecture, Asaka Takatou sat across from her boss, Shiraishi, in one of the modern facility's meeting rooms, giving her regular report.

"What happened after that?"

"Oh, nothing that impressive. They couldn't just take him back to an empty village, and certainly couldn't just leave him on the mountain. So they brought him to this facility. It was already equipped to lock up—er, to research people like him, who were completely beyond our understanding."

"Even after correcting yourself, you still make this place sound like an evil laboratory, don't you think?"

"While we certainly do keep them imprisoned here, they aren't exactly people we can just let roam free, are they?"

It was true, everyone held at the facility would cause chaos if released into the world, so even if it happened outside the bounds of the law, it was hard to argue that it was necessary to keep them under control.

"Now that you mention it," Asaka said, "there were those people from the branch family... Why didn't you have them look after Yogiri?"

“You mean the Shidou family? Unfortunately, they all died.”

“I don’t remember that being part of your story!”

“The secret ritual they performed takes the whole family, and they all died after it.”

“You’re talking awfully lightly about something that seems to be a huge deal!”

“I mean, it’s not like chanting a spell would be enough to stop him when he’s on a rampage.”

“But that branch family was set up as a last resort, wasn’t it?” Asaka asked. “Are there any others?” The branch group had been created in case the main family was wiped out. Considering how much trouble had been taken, it wouldn’t have been surprising if they had prepared multiple backup families.

“There are a number of them. But the news had already got out that such a dangerous being was hiding in the village in the Restricted Area. Trying to leave everything to civilians now would be impossible. While the other families are working with us, the state needed to take control of the situation.”

“A lot of people died, so I can understand why they didn’t just send him back to the village...but Yogiri wasn’t conscious at the time, so it’s not like he can be held responsible.”

“Applying human laws and ethics to him doesn’t seem appropriate to me in the first place. You can’t really use the same rules for a being that can kill with its thoughts.”

“So you’re saying he’s more than human?” Asaka remembered a science fiction novel she had read long ago. That novel spoke of a group of people, the Homo Gestalt, who had transcended humanity. For them, maintaining the same ethical and moral codes as humanity was meaningless. She felt like that story was applicable to Yogiri’s situation.

“Theodore Sturgeon, wasn’t it? That’s a nostalgic name,” Shiraishi said. “Wait, isn’t that book out of print?”

“Getting a hold of old sci-fi classics is hard, even though the nerds always act like it’s required reading...”

“Do you read a lot of sci-fi?” Shiraishi asked.

“I was a literature girl, after all. I’ve read it all.”

“A literature girl?”

“There was a time I was just a girl!”

“No, I only meant I didn’t expect you to be so fond of reading.”

“That’s also kind of insulting!”

“I am technically your boss, remember?”

In spite of the warning, Asaka had doubts about whether she had been given an actual position in this unorthodox organization.

“Speaking of which,” she said, “the underground village was made for Yogiri, right? How did you guys build it so quickly?”

“The space had already existed as a giant empty pit. Since he was used to living in such an old-fashioned place, we didn’t think that suddenly thrusting him into the modern world was a good idea, so we replicated the village he originally lived in. We actually just moved the entire village underground, so it wasn’t especially difficult.”

“What do you mean, moving an entire village underground wasn’t difficult?” Technology in this hidden world seemed to be on a completely different level. Ordinary people only saw the tip of the iceberg. “Oh, that being said, his simple life has kind of fallen apart...”

Yogiri often played video games, read manga, and ate instant food. One could hardly call his lifestyle simple and healthy anymore.

“I think that’s fine,” Shiraishi said. “It’s not like we were trying to keep him clean and pure or anything.”

Part of Asaka’s job was teaching Yogiri how to live in modern Japanese society. All of the things he did were parts of Japanese culture, so there was no issue with them.

“By the way, Miss Takatou.”

“What is it? The way you said that is giving me a bad feeling.”

“Apologies in advance, but it seems like you will be having another visitor soon.”

“Again?! Are you sure that’s a good idea? You’re supposed to be keeping Yogiri isolated, aren’t you?”

They had put him in this mysterious underground village so far below sea level to keep the threat to the world that he posed as far from prying eyes as possible. Having people come and use the space whenever they found it convenient kind of defeated the purpose.

“That’s true, but once again, these are orders from above.”

“So what royalty is visiting us this time?”

They had previously been visited by someone calling himself a “king of

the world," so Asaka figured it would be someone similar.

"They're from Japan."

"Like the Prime Minister?"

"One of the people who lead the world from the shadows, the head of the Sumeragi family."

"Ahh...I've heard that name before. They were dark fixers or something, right? And they called him something like 'my lord'?"

A girl had once visited them: Enju Sumeragi. She had been brought down there thanks to the Sumeragi family flexing its authority.

"This time our visitor will be the lord himself, Kisasage Sumeragi. He is Miss Enju's grandfather."

"That wouldn't happen to be like a yakuza family relationship, would it?!"

Asaka couldn't help but feel that would definitely be a bad influence on Yogiri.

◇ ◇ ◇

Those who knew him would call Kisasage Sumeragi the greatest villain in Japan. It was said the foundations of the world rested in his hands, a result of his wicked ways. He didn't recognize what he was doing as evil. He only chose the methods that were most efficient to accomplish his goals. If someone stood against him, he had them assassinated. If he needed to control them, he took hostages. If he needed information, he would torture it out of them, and if they possessed something he needed, he would steal it. If he thought some way was the best method, he wouldn't hesitate for a moment.

That was who Kisasage was, and the rest of the Sumeragi family were no different. They ruled Japan from the shadows, so of course they were hated. On the surface, no one could oppose them. If anyone showed even the slightest sign of defiance, their whole family would be slaughtered. Everyone knew that if they tried anything, they would meet the same fate. So while they earned everyone's hatred, people were forced to hide that resentment deep in their hearts.

One couldn't extinguish something invisible like grudges held by the dead. The Sumeragi family was involved with the dark side of the world, and were familiar with the mysterious, the supernatural, and technologies that

defied comprehension. They were well aware that something like grudges or curses posed a legitimate threat and were naturally prepared to defend against them. They knew full well how much they were hated and had taken the greatest measures to protect themselves from such curses.

That being said, their defenses weren't perfect. No matter how careful one was, there would always be a slight gap in defense. There were the tiniest of cracks, through which the smallest of powerless feelings would be able to slip through. Most of it would be scraped off, broken apart, and rendered harmless, diluted to the point of being unable to affect people. That level of defense would normally be enough and should have been perfectly sufficient.

But the Sumeragi family had garnered too much hatred. The endless stream of resentment aimed at them gathered and persisted, no matter how diluted each emotion was individually. Little by little, the tiny shreds of resentment continued to accumulate, settling around them as an invisible curse. After being allowed to gather for hundreds of years, it took on a form that was impossible to ignore.

At first, it was just a bit of mold. At some point, impurities had started to appear in the tea that Kisasage drank. Of course, the servant who had prepared it had been executed, but it was still strange. It was obvious that such a thing would not be tolerated, so they should have taken the utmost care to ensure something so rude never happened again.

But it continued to happen over and over. Whether it was tea, alcohol, or water, anything Kisasage drank would have faint traces of mold appear in it. The tap water came out slightly dirty, and despite the air being perfectly filtered, a faintly unpleasant odor began to hang around him.

While it wasn't something significant enough to threaten his life, it was clear that something strange was going on. He understood that it was supernatural immediately and so took further precautions to protect himself. But those ominous occurrences continued to occur. Faint sounds of moaning could be heard in the distance. Vague shadows began to appear around his mansion, wandering but otherwise doing nothing. The smell of rusted metal began to fill the air.

Each event was nothing important on its own, but these bizarre happenings followed Kisasage everywhere he went. With the aid of exorcists and priests, he was able to suppress them for a while, but that didn't change the resentment aimed at his family. If the source wasn't dealt with, the

abnormalities would continue to return.

Kisasage was a determined, resolute man. Such events weren't enough to unsettle him. As unpleasant as they were, he laughed them off as meaningless. But that only allowed the curse to slowly strangle him.

If you tried to strangle someone with a single strand of thread, they wouldn't pay any mind. Even the slightest bit of strength would snap the thread in two. But those single threads were being layered around his neck continuously. Slowly but surely, they gained strength. At some point, they would bind him with a force that he couldn't shake off.

Kisasage eventually found himself unable to laugh about it.

◇ ◇ ◇

"So, we'll be having another visitor. This time it'll be Enju's grandpa."

In the living room of their underground mansion, Asaka explained what she had learned on the surface.

"Is Enju coming too?!" Yogiri's face lit up.

"I didn't hear anything about that. He will have some attendants with him, though."

It was the same as when Enju had visited. She'd come with a huge group of rough individuals who didn't seem like they could be anything other than mafia or yakuza.

"They must be crazy to be coming all the way down here," Estelle commented.

"Not very convincing coming from someone who's doing the same thing," Asaka replied. Estelle had similarly invaded their home. In the past, she had been kept drugged so as to be barely conscious, but now she was free to do as she liked.

"I mean, I'm also someone they're trying to keep isolated."

"I was told he was coming, but I don't really know why. Enju came because she was hiding from a battle, but..."

Enju Sumeragi was a young girl, a little older than Yogiri, who had visited them before. Wrapped up in a battle to decide the fate of humanity, she had come down here to be protected from her attackers. This place had countless layers of security guarding it, making it likely the safest place in Japan and certainly the hardest to infiltrate. Enju had, in fact, been able to avoid her

battle by hiding here.

"Anyway, this time I feel like we should avoid getting involved with them," she announced. But without knowing why the guy was coming, she couldn't say for sure that they wouldn't be somehow dragged into it.

"When is he getting here?" asked Estelle.

"Right away. I wonder if they'll come down the same way Enju did."

As far as Asaka knew, there were two ways to reach the underground complex. The first was the official route that she used, and the second was to take the freight elevator. Enju and her companions had used the latter, so it was likely they would use it again this time.

"Let's go take a look," Yogiri said.

"What? Did you not just hear me say we shouldn't get involved? I guess it would be weird to not meet them at all, though. Maybe we should at least go say hello."

The village wasn't that big, so completely avoiding them wouldn't really be possible. It was probably best to establish where they stood right off the bat.

"Okay, I guess we should at least go see what's up."

"I'm fine here," Estelle said. "It would be a pain if any of them ended up falling for me."

She called herself the most beautiful person in the world. When she'd first heard that, Asaka had thought it was a bit much, but apparently the woman's beauty was so great as to be classified as a superpower. It seemed she could control it to an extent, but it was almost guaranteed that she could make any adult male fall for her. Asaka could imagine that meeting multiple people who had power and authority within the dark side of the world would be no small amount of hassle.

"Okay then. I don't know if they're here yet, but let's go for a walk."

"Okay!"

Leaving the mansion, they went to the outskirts of the village. There was a huge shaft there containing an elevator. The entrance of the elevator led out to a farm road, which was overflowing with people.

There were far more of them than Asaka had anticipated. She had felt similarly when Enju had come with trucks carrying her luggage, but it seemed the family were intent on outdoing themselves this time.

"Who the hell are you?!" A man in a black suit, whose only redeeming

quality seemed to be his nicely put together outfit, had noticed them.

"Oh, I remember this from last time," Asaka said.

"Is everything okay?" Yogiri looked worried.

"It's fine. It's not like they're going to hurt us—"

But the men who had seen them immediately pulled out handguns and aimed them at her.

"I guess maybe things aren't okay." With Yogiri around, her safety was guaranteed, but that didn't mean having guns pointed at her felt very pleasant.

"Cut it out, you idiots!" A man looking slightly more important than the three gunmen stepped in. "You're Miss Takatou, I presume? Our lord has summoned you," the senior-looking yakuza politely called out to them.

"Ah, that's right. We should at least introduce ourselves."

Asaka and Yogiri went with the man, who led them to a jet black luxury car. As they approached, a man in a Buddhist priest's outfit stepped out of the passenger seat. For a moment, Asaka thought he was the lord the man had mentioned, but she soon decided that someone of such a high rank wouldn't be sitting in the passenger seat. After he got out, another monk exited from the rear of the vehicle, followed by an old man in casual dress.

"Yo! Thanks for having us," he said candidly.

This old man must have been Kisasage Sumeragi, the head of the family that led the world by the nose from the shadows.

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“Ah, yes, welcome. Umm...what is it you want here?” Asaka asked timidly.

“They didn’t tell you? Well, I guess you’d call it a health thing. I’m getting pretty old. I wanted to relax for a bit, but up on the surface I’d get interrupted no matter where I went.”

In spite of the man saying he was getting older, it was hard to tell exactly how old he was. He certainly wasn’t young, but he didn’t seem anywhere close to being senile.

“Hey, is Enju coming?” Yogiri asked, not the least bit hesitant.

“Enju? Oh yeah, she was here before. Sorry, kid, this time it’s just me.” Kisasage replied bluntly, as if totally uninterested in his grandchildren.

“Oh, okay.”

“We’re going to be using a number of buildings in the village. You don’t mind, do you?” Apparently, Kisasage had only wanted to say hello, as after that his subordinate took up the conversation.

“It’s not something I can give permission for, so as long as it matches whatever you discussed with my superiors, you can do as you like,” Asaka replied.

The village in this underground space was filled with buildings that no one lived in. It would be a problem if they moved into the mansion where Asaka and Yogiri were staying, but besides that, she didn’t mind what they did.

◇ ◇ ◇

A few days passed after Kisasage’s arrival. There had been no change in Asaka and Yogiri’s lifestyle. Unlike when Enju had come, there was no contact with the other party, and without Enju around, Yogiri had no interest in her grandfather.

“But for health reasons... That seems like a strange reason to come all the way here.”

Asaka had her doubts. There weren’t anything like hot springs here, and even if it looked like a rural village rich with nature, it was almost all artificial. Though the air was clean, the atmosphere here was completely controlled, so it was far from natural.

“When are they leaving?” Yogiri asked.

They were in the living room studying. He was trying to answer questions that Asaka had made for him.

"I don't know, I haven't heard anything."

If he was here for his health, did that mean he would stay until he was well again? But he didn't look like he was having any problems with his health in the first place.

"Maybe after we're done studying we can go take a look."

Since Kisasage's arrival, they had refrained from going to the village on their walks. But without knowing how long the visitors would be there, there was no point in avoiding the place.

"Okay!"

Even without going outside, they could pass the time easily enough with all their video games, so they had done exactly that for the last few days, but it wasn't healthy to keep up that lifestyle for long.

Having filled out the answer sheet, Yogiri handed it to Asaka for corrections. He had gotten every question right. He seemed to have already reached an academic level surpassing his age. She had recently begun to raise the difficulty of the problems she was giving him, but he had kept up with them without issue. His academic ability was enough to qualify for the most prestigious middle schools in the country.

This is fine for his elementary school education, but what are we going to do after that? Asaka was worried about the next steps for him.

"Did I make a mistake?"

"Nope, you got them all. Well done. All right, let's go for a walk."

After cleaning up their study materials, they went outside. The moment they did, something already seemed off. Even though it was the middle of the day, everything was strangely dark. Looking up, the sky was clear, so it seemed the weather system was working fine.

"Huh. Maybe it's just my imagination."

As they walked on to the village, the worry slipped from Asaka's mind.

Walking between the rice fields, the village soon came into view. When they got close, they noticed that security had become quite strict. Men had taken up positions around the entire village. The road was blocked, and they had set lookouts on top of the buildings. Obviously, they noticed Asaka and Yogiri approaching, so they turned their rifles on them. Since they were giving the impression that if the two of them got any closer they would be

shot without warning, Asaka decided they should turn back.

"I guess we should take our walk somewhere else."

"Yeah, okay."

He's definitely not here just for his health...

These people were obviously on guard against something. Asaka felt like things were going to get troublesome again.

◇ ◇ ◇

A few days later, Asaka and Yogiri visited the village again. While it would certainly be smarter not to get involved with them, if they didn't go check on them every once in a while, they wouldn't know if their visitors had ever left. They decided to go as far as they had the time before to see how things were.

"I wonder what's wrong? They're still on guard, but it doesn't seem as lively..."

"I think there are less of them," Yogiri offered.

"Ahh, I see." There were clearly fewer people protecting the village now, the road and rooftops more sparsely populated than last time. They saw Asaka and Yogiri again, but this time their response seemed strange. Last time, it had almost seemed like they were daring her to approach, but now they looked afraid.

"I guess it's nothing we can figure out from here," Asaka mused. But something had clearly changed in the village. It was almost like a darkness was settling over it.

◇ ◇ ◇

Another few days passed. The lookouts were gone, and the village was silent.

"Did they go home?" Yogiri asked.

"I guess we should go find out."

Asaka would have expected Kisasage to come and say goodbye, so she thought something might have happened to him.

They approached the village. The unpaved road was muddy, giving the unpleasant sensation of their feet sinking in as they walked.

“It hasn’t rained recently, has it?” Asaka asked.

“Nope.”

They did get rain down there, but as if out of consideration for the two of them, it was kept to a minimum, and things dried out again right away.

As they got closer, they noticed an unpleasant, rotten smell in the air. Though it was faint, it was undeniably off-putting.

“What the... What happened here?” asked Yogiri.

“I don’t know.”

As they stepped into the village, everything seemed to go dark. The buildings all seemed damp—and something was oozing out of the pillars. Looking into one of the old huts, Asaka saw someone inside.

“Sorry to bother you, but what is...”

She trailed off as she opened the door. No one was there. From the window, she had seen what looked like a person in the room, but when they went inside, it was empty.

“What’s wrong?” Yogiri asked.

“I thought someone was here, but...maybe it was just my imagination.” Since no one was around, that must have been it. “Maybe they did go home after all?”

When they looked into another house, she got her answer. The building was full of people. Bodies of men in black suits had been piled up inside.

“Stop! Yogiri, don’t look in here!”

Yogiri stayed outside while Asaka went in to investigate.

“What on Earth happened here?”

The men were clearly dead. The bodies had been mercilessly crammed into the room. There were quite a few of them, but none of them had any visible injuries, which meant she was facing a huge pile of dead bodies with no clear cause of death.

Asaka hurriedly fled from the house.

“What’s wrong?”

“There’s a ton of dead people inside! There might have been some kind of disease! We should leave right away!”

“It’s okay. I can kill germs.”

“Really?”

“Yeah! I’ll keep you safe, so don’t worry!”

“I see... I guess if we run away now, we won’t learn anything...”

They decided to look around the village a little more. Walking down the main street, they headed for the largest house. Asaka had the impression that was where the lord would have stayed. Barging in seemed rude, so she checked around the building first. She could hear the sound of voices, an unsettling chanting that seemed to be some kind of sutra.

Looking in through the window, she saw people inside. This time it definitely wasn't her imagination. Priests were sitting in a circle, reciting sutras. At the center of the circle was the lord. Sitting with his legs crossed, he looked bored. She didn't know what they were doing, but he was likely tired of having to sit around and listen to sutras he didn't understand.

Asaka immediately stepped away. "All right, let's go back."

It didn't seem like there was anything they could do there.

◇ ◇ ◇

A few more days passed. While they were studying in the living room, they heard a noise outside. Taking a look, they found a man in priest's garb collapsed on the ground.

"Huh? Are you okay?!" Asaka hurried outside, running to the man's side. He had fallen facedown so they couldn't see who he was, but he must have been one of the priests staying in the village.

"Hello?! He's obviously not okay. Ah, dammit! Should I call an ambulance? No, CPR, right? Do we have an AED here?"

"Asaka, he's already dead."

"What? No, even if it looks that way, we need to try to help him..."

As she spoke, she flipped the man faceup. His features had rotted almost completely away, deteriorating to the point where he was better off being dead.

"Something must have happened in the village..."

Asaka hesitated for a moment, then stood up again. Something abnormal was clearly happening. They couldn't just ignore it anymore.

"Let's go take a look."

The two of them headed back to the village.

"Whoa, I really don't want to go in anymore..." she said when they arrived.

A single glance at the village showed that something was clearly wrong.

While it still had the same rough shape, it seemed almost entirely rotted through.

"But we can't just stand here and do nothing."

She covered her face with a handkerchief, and Yogiri did the same. Then they strode into the village, towards the building where Kisasage was staying. This time they went straight inside, not bothering to take their shoes off at the entrance. The floor was so sticky that they couldn't bear to expose their feet to it. Walking down the hall, they headed for the room where the bizarre ritual had been held.

Everyone inside was dead—the priests and Kisasage himself. Whenever they had died, their bodies were already thoroughly rotten.

"I guess we should report this."

There was nothing more they could do.

◇ ◇ ◇

Returning to the mansion, Asaka triggered the emergency alarm.

"Well, this is certainly a disaster."

They waited until her boss came down in person.

"Didn't you say you were too high-ranking to come down here yourself?" Asaka asked.

"That was true at first, to prevent AΩ from being aware of us, but after he came up to the surface, he saw everyone anyway. There's not much point in avoiding it now."

The two of them sat across from each other at the dining table in the living room. Yogiri was outside playing with their dog, Nikori.

"All of them are dead," Shiraishi continued. "That seems to be the situation." He had gone to check out the village first. Other workers from the Institute were there now, cleaning up the aftermath.

"What exactly happened?" Asaka still had no idea what had occurred. Judging from the result, they had been caught up in something supernatural, but that didn't explain much.

"It's hard to say for now. If I had to guess, they came here in search of spiritual protection."

"So wouldn't coming in such a large group have been a mistake? Who knows what tagged along with them?"

Asaka recalled the time something had snuck into the underground space by hiding in her shadow. Although there were talismans, sutras, and idols set up to keep those kinds of things out, there were still ways for them to sneak in.

"Seriously, can we stop letting people come down here?" she complained. "Nothing good ever comes of it."

"I agree, to be honest. But I can't disobey my superiors."

"He was the most powerful person involved in the dark side of the world, right? What'll happen now that he's dead?"

"I suspect it won't be too chaotic. There's a pretty solid system to determine succession, so I imagine the changeover will be quite easy."

"Not that it's anything for me to worry about... So what do we do next?"

"We'll have to incinerate the village. Unfortunately, there's no other option."

It wasn't the most satisfying conclusion, but that was the course they decided to take.

◇ ◇ ◇

Kisasage had come without explaining why, and the cause of his death was a mystery. After he was gone, things became peaceful again.

"In the end, it was just a bunch of yakuza who died."

They were part of the criminal underworld, so it wasn't hard for a respectable citizen like Asaka to write them off as being totally unrelated to her own life.

"I died again."

Yogiri was playing video games in the living room. Asaka was resting her elbows on the dining table, munching on rice crackers as she watched him. He was playing an old school shooter. She had felt it was somehow better than having him play newer games, so she had pulled out a bunch of retro games for him to play. Shiraishi seemed to think it was all a matter of taste, but Asaka insisted that the old 8-bit consoles were invaluable in developing the imagination of a growing child.

"Maybe you should take a break," she suggested.

"Yeah, I think I will." Coming over to the table, Yogiri poured some barley tea from the pot into his cup. "Huh? There's something floating in it."

“Hm? Is there a hole in the tea pack?” Having put the pack in the pot, she had just put tap water into it and couldn’t be bothered to remove it afterwards, so maybe there was a hole leaking some of the contents out.

“What is it? It’s round and floaty.”

“Wait, is that mold? No way, I’ve been drinking it the whole time!” Asaka looked at her own cup in a panic. The fact that she didn’t see anything like mold left in it wasn’t particularly encouraging. “Let’s throw this out. But we just made it fresh, didn’t we?” She cocked her head in confusion.

After that, strange things continued to happen. The tap water grew dirty. A bad smell appeared out of nowhere. Nikori began fixating on empty spaces and barking. The floor and support beams began to feel sticky. They began to hear moaning coming from somewhere. Spiders and centipedes began to appear all over the house.

None of them were that bad individually, but with all of these things happening in quick succession, Asaka couldn’t help but think something was going on.

“Yogiri, do you feel like something’s been off recently?”

“Yeah, things seem weird.”

It was nighttime. They were lying on the floor on their futons. Asaka couldn’t help but feel like hers was somehow damp.

“Hmm. Maybe I should ask Shiraishi about it.” As she said that, she saw a shadow moving on the other side of the paper screen door. “Huh? We closed the doors, right?”

“Yeah, since the shadow people will come inside if we don’t.”

“Was that one of them?”

“I don’t think so.”

In this place, black shadows appeared at night. Neither of them knew what those shadows wanted, but if they closed the doors tight, the creatures wouldn’t come inside.

Asaka got up from her futon and opened the sliding door. No one was there. As she looked around, wondering where the shadow had gone, the phone rang. It wasn’t connected to anything, so it shouldn’t have been ringing. Not knowing that before, Asaka had once taken a phone call that had asked her to go out and had ended up getting caught up in something bizarre.

“Yogiri, can you come with me?”

“Okay.”

Although she was more than familiar with the house, something definitely felt off. Approaching the ringing phone, she picked up the receiver.

"Hello?"

There was no response, but she sensed that someone was on the other end. She put down the receiver. As she did, she heard the sound of something crawling into the house.

"Oh, give me a break!"

She went back into the room and threw her futon over her head.

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As the days passed, the bizarre happenings began to worsen. The unpleasant odor grew stronger. The air quality inside became so bad that they felt they would develop a cough. Even when they opened the windows and sunlight streamed in, the interior remained dark. They could hear the sound of a baby crying somewhere. The floor and support beams felt like they had oil dripping from them. Fresh food in the refrigerator spoiled immediately. Rust came out in the water from the tap. Red handprints began to appear around the house.

"Okay, this is definitely some sort of curse, right?!"

At this point there was no doubting it. Whatever attacked Kisasage Sumeragi was now attacking their home.

"What is this? Like seriously!"

"Asaka, are you okay?"

"Ahh, not really."

They stepped outside. The ground was muddy and unpleasant. It was the same as what had happened in the village around Kisasage. The forest around them also seemed strange. The trees had begun to rot where they stood. When they went to check the rice fields, the crops had withered there as well.

They looked around the entire underground space, but it was the same everywhere. The trees, crops, and buildings were all rotting. The water in the irrigation ditches was stained red. Dead snakes lined the roads. They could see figures on the edges of their vision that disappeared when they turned to look, and it always felt like they were being followed. There was no safe place anywhere.

"This is too strange! We have no connection to the Sumeragi family at all!

We didn’t do anything wrong! Or what?! Are we getting cursed because we talked to him a little?!” She didn’t know why, but it seemed the place itself had been cursed. “We can’t stay here like this.”

Asaka headed back to the mansion but gave up on gathering their things. All of their belongings seemed to have been contaminated, so it was pointless to bring them along.

“Asaka...” Yogiri looked up at her, worried.

“You’re coming too, Yogiri. They can’t complain about you coming up if things are like this down here.”

Yogiri was supposed to remain isolated, but they couldn’t leave him in a place like this. Taking their Shetland Sheepdog, Nikori, with them, they left the mansion empty-handed. She didn’t know if there was any point in running away, but they couldn’t live there anymore.

They hurried to the edge of the underground space. The air itself felt sticky and heavy. The muddy ground sucked their feet down, making walking difficult. A fog settled over them, gradually spreading out and blanketing the world in white. Before long, they couldn’t see anything and had lost track of where they were.

“Where did this fog even come from?!”

Unable to see where they were going, Asaka came to a stop. Nikori whimpered, afraid. They could hear moaning in the distance. Sounds like deep breaths, things crawling across the ground, and something dripping could also be heard.

They began to see figures in the fog. Distorted, vague shadows appeared all around them, slowly approaching from every direction. Whatever their intentions, they had soon surrounded the trio. Asaka had a feeling that touching them was a bad idea. She instinctively understood that touching them would mean the end of her.

“Yogiri, do you think you can do something about them?”

“I can.”

“Of course. There’s no way you could deal with something so— Wait, you can?!”

“Yeah.”

“All this weird stuff?”

She didn’t know what any of these things were, and each one was little more than slightly unpleasant. Asaka had thought Yogiri wouldn’t be able to

target them.

“I’m sorry. I should have done something sooner.”

He stretched out a hand. As he did, the fog began to disappear. Starting from the area around his hand, the unsettling shadows, the aggravating moaning, and the nauseating odor in the air vanished. Of course the muddiness of the ground didn’t change, but it didn’t cling to their feet like it had before.

“What’s going on?”

It was all resolved in an instant.

“Sorry...”

“No, you don’t have to apologize.”

“I thought if I let things get worse, I’d be able to go outside.”

“Huh? Oh, is that what it was?” He must have thought that if they couldn’t live in the underground space anymore, they would have to leave. “Either way, that’s not something you need to apologize for. I think the methods this facility uses are not okay.”

There was nothing wrong with him taking an interest in the outside world. They couldn’t just leave Yogiri trapped down here forever. As far as she was concerned, eventually they would have to let him outside.

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Even though the bizarre occurrences had ceased, the aftermath remained, so it didn’t change the fact that they couldn’t live there anymore. They went up to the surface anyway, accepting temporary accommodations provided to them within the facility.

“I feel like my common sense has begun to degrade ever since coming here,” Asaka said.

“They say that common sense is just a collection of your prejudices, so maybe you could say it’s better you’ve become less ignorant,” Shiraishi offered.

“Not at all! I’d much rather have lived never knowing about these things!”

Asaka and her supervisor were in the same meeting room as always. Yogiri was playing in his living quarters, so the two of them were alone.

“What was going on down there?”

“I’m not too familiar with the occult myself, but according to the experts,

it seemed to be something like a curse or a grudge."

"I can understand why someone who led the world from the shadows would be hated, but things were fine up until now, weren't they?"

"Yes, I guess they just finally crossed the threshold. Hatred or resentment aren't enough to hurt an ordinary person, but the Sumeragi family has been collecting negative emotions for hundreds of years. After gathering up so much for so long, it began to overflow, eventually becoming dangerous...although that explanation still sounds strange to me."

"But why would the curse affect *us*?" Asaka asked. "We had nothing to do with him."

"What counts as 'related to him' is probably pretty vague from the curse's standpoint. It could be just because you talked to him or because you were nearby."

"Give me a break..."

Whether a collection of resentful feelings was conscious enough to make decisions as to who it targeted wasn't clear either.

"So what do we do now?" she asked.

"That's a good question. No other place has security even close to what you had down there."

Even with the curse gone, the state of the underground facility was miserable and would take a significant amount of time to repair.

"Those buildings were originally brought down from the surface, so it's not like there are replacements available."

"It doesn't really have to be identical, though, does it? While we have the chance, why don't we get full air conditioning and a home theater?"

"I'll take your suggestions into consideration."

It didn't seem like there was any chance of that happening.

Afterword

At last, volume seven. My longest series up until this point has been seven volumes, so I've now matched that! I still plan on writing a volume eight, so it looks like I'll be setting a new record. Thank you so much!

So, let's get right into sharing the names of those who provided BS cheat powers for this volume.

Robot summoning: Kururu
Auto-revival, Resurrection: Bright, Tori, Hirokku
Multiple lives: Riru Mandou
Spikes growing from a shield: Daken
Skill-stealing abilities: Shingo, Kiruha
Erasure: Professor Awesome
Inability to be detected: Jin Takami
Moving at the speed of light: Odoruwarai

Some I used quite a bit and others not so much, so thank you for your understanding. I plan to use those that didn't show up here in later volumes. Since I called for "BS" cheats, an awful lot of suggestions came in involving s**t, but I wasn't brave enough to use them. I received way more submissions than expected, so I don't think I'll be doing another one of these, but I'll always be taking questions for the Question Corner! I would be very grateful if you kept sending those in!

Finally, my thanks.

To my editor: thank you as always. This time you had to work over Obon, so I'm sure it was more difficult than usual.

To the illustrator, Chisato Naruse: your artwork is always fantastic. Sorry for always leaving things to the last minute. I really appreciate that you can still deliver everything on time despite that.

Next is volume eight! As always, I look forward to your support in the future!

Tsuyoshi Fujitaka
藤孝　剛志

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Hello! This is the illustrator, Chisato Naruse.

The main character finally changed his clothes in volume seven! I figured he'd keep nuking the sweat stains from his white shirt and wear his school uniform all the way to the end... I never expected the opportunity to arise somewhere like this!

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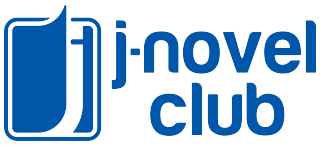

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My Instant Death Ability Is So Overpowered, No One in This Other World Stands a Chance Against Me! Volume 7
by Tsuyoshi Fujitaka

Translated by Nathan Macklem
Edited by Tess Nanavati

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